



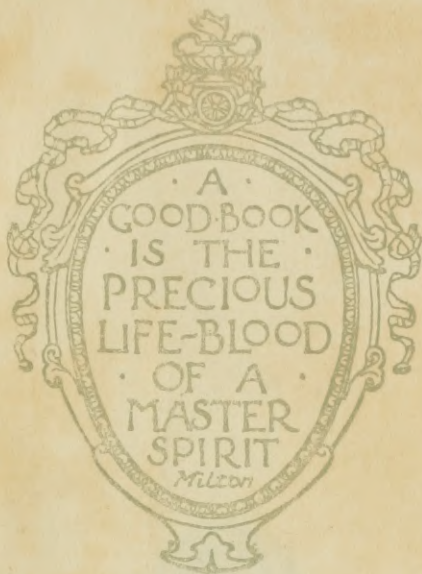
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MORE ANIMAL STORIES



(Sir)
BY
CHAS. G. D. ROBERTS

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MORE ANIMAL STORIES

THE FISHERS OF THE AIR

THE lake lay in a deep and sun-soaked valley facing south, sheltered from the sea-winds by a high hog-back of dark green spruce and hemlock forest, broken sharply here and there by outcroppings of white granite.

Beyond the hog-back, some three or four miles away, the green seas creamed and thundered in sleepless turmoil against the towering black cliffs, clamorous with seagulls. But over the lake brooded a blue and glittering silence, broken only, at long intervals, by the long-drawn, wistful flute-cry of the Canada whitethroat from some solitary tree-top:

Lean—lean—lean-to-me—lean-to-me—lean-to-me— of all bird voices the one most poignant with loneliness and longing.

On the side of the lake nearest to the hog-back the dark green of the forest came down to within forty or fifty paces of the water's edge, and was fringed by a narrow ribbon of very light, tender green—a dense, low growth of Indian willow, elder shrub, and withewood, tangled with white clematis and starred with wild convolvulus. From the sharply-defined edge of this gracious tangle a beach of clean sand, dazzlingly white, sloped down to and slid beneath the transparent

golden lip of the amber-tinted water. The sand, both below and above the water's edge, was of an amazing radiance. Being formed by the infinitely slow breaking down of the ancient granite, through ages of alternating suns and rains and heats and frosts, it consisted purely of the indestructible, coarse white crystals of the quartz, whose facets caught the sun like a drift of diamonds.

The opposite shores of the lake were low and swampy, studded here and there with tall, naked, weather-bleached "rampikes"—the trunks of ancient fir trees blasted and stripped by some long-past forest fire. These melancholy ghosts of trees rose from a riotously gold-green carpet of rank marsh-grasses, sweeping around in an interminable, unbroken curve to the foot of the lake, where, through the cool shadows of water-ash and balsam-poplar, the trout-haunted outlet stream rippled away musically to join the sea some seven or eight miles farther on. All along the gold-green sweep of the marsh-grass spread acre upon acre of the flat leaves of the water-lily, starred with broad, white, golden-hearted, exquisitely-perfumed blooms, the paradise of the wild bees and honey-loving summer flies.

Over this vast crystal bowl of green-and-amber solitude domed a sky of cloudless blue, and high in the blue hung a great bird, slowly wheeling. From his height he held in view the intense sparkling of the sea beyond the hog-back, the creaming of the surf about the outer rocks, and the sudden upspringing of the gulls, like a puff of blown petals, as some wave, higher and more impetuous than its predecessor, drove them from their perches. But the aerial watcher had heed only

for the lake below him, lying windless and unshadowed in the sun. His piercing eyes, jewel-bright, and with an amazing range of vision, could penetrate to all the varying depths of the lake and detect the movements of its finny hordes. The great sluggish lake-trout, or "togue," usually lurking in the obscurest deeps, the shining, active, vermilion-spotted brook-trout, foraging voraciously nearer the shore and the surface, the fat, mud-loving "suckers," rooting the oozy bottom like pigs among the roots of the water-lilies, the silvery chub and the green-and-gold, fiercely-spined perch haunting the weedy feeding-grounds down toward the outlet—all these he observed, and differentiated with an expert's eye, attempting to foresee which ones, in their feeding or their play, were likely soonest to approach the surface of their glimmering golden world.

Suddenly he paused in his slow wheeling, dipped forward, and dropped, with narrowed wings, down, down from his dizzy height to within something like fifty yards of the water. Here he stopped, with wings wide-spread, and hovered almost motionless, slowly sinking like a waft of thistledown when the breeze has died away. He had seen a fair-sized trout rise lightly and suck in a fly which had fallen on the bright surface. The ringed ripples of the rise had hardly smoothed away when the trout rose again. As it gulped its tiny, half-drowned prey, the poised bird shot downward again—urged by a powerful surge of his wings before he closed them—this time with terrific speed. He struck the water with a resounding splash, disappeared beneath it, and rose again two or three yards beyond with the

trout securely gripped in his talons. Shaking the bright drops in a shower from his wings, he flapped hurriedly away with his captive to his nest on the steep slope of the hog-back. He flew with eager haste, as fast as his broad wings would carry him; for he feared lest his one dreaded foe, the great white-headed eagle, should swoop down out of space on hissing pinions and rob him of his prize.

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The nest of the osprey was built in the crotch of an old, lightning-blasted pine which rose from a fissure in the granite about fifty feet above the lake. As the osprey had practically no foes to be dreaded except that tyrannical robber, the great white-headed eagle—which, indeed, only cared to rob him of his fish, and never dared drive him to extremities by appearing to threaten his precious nestlings—the nest was built without any pretence of concealment, or, indeed, any attempt at inaccessibility, save such as was afforded by the high, smooth, naked trunk which supported it. An immense grey, weather-beaten structure, conspicuous for miles, it looked like a loose cartload of rubbish, but in reality the sticks and dried rushes and mud and strips of shredded bark of which it was built were so solidly and cunningly interwoven as to withstand the wildest of winter gales. It was his permanent summer home, to which he and his handsome, daring mate were wont to return each spring from their winter sojourn in the sun lands of the south. A little tidying-up, a little patching with sticks and mud, a relining with feathers

and soft, winter-withered grasses, and the old nest was quickly ready to receive the eggs of his mate—beautiful and precious eggs, two, three, or four in number, and usually of the rich colour of old ivory very thickly splashed with a warm purplish brown.

This summer there were four nestlings in the great untidy nest; and they kept both their devoted parents busy, catching and tearing up into convenient morsels fish enough to satisfy their vigorous appetites. At the moment when the father osprey returned from the lake with the trout which he had just caught they were full-fed and fast asleep, their downy heads and half-feathered, scrawny necks comfortably resting across one another's pulsing bodies. The mother-bird, who had recently fed them, was away, fishing in the long green-grey seas beyond the hog-back. The father, seeing them thus satisfied, tore up the trout and swallowed it, with dignified deliberation, himself. Food was plentiful, and he was not over-hungry. Then, having scrupulously wiped his beak and preened his feathers, he settled himself upright on the edge of the nest and became apparently lost in contemplation of the spacious and tranquil scene outspread beneath him. A pair of bustling little crow-blackbirds, who had made their own small home among the outer sticks of the gigantic nest, flew backwards and forwards diligently, bringing insects in their bills for their naked, newly-hatched brood. Their metallic black plumage shone iridescently, purple and green and radiant blue, in the unclouded sunlight, and from time to time the great osprey rolled his eyes upon them with a mild and casual interest. Neither

he nor his mate had the slightest objection to their presence—being amicably disposed towards all living creatures except fish and possible assailants of the nest. And the blackbirds dwelt in security under that powerful, though involuntary, protection.

The osprey, the great fish-hawk or fish-eagle of Eastern North America, was the most attractive, in character, of all the predatory tribes of the hawks and eagles. Of dauntless courage without being quarrelsome or tyrannical, he strictly minded his own business, which was that of catching fish; and none of the wild folk of the forest, whether furred or feathered, had cause to fear him so long as they threatened no peril to his home or young. On account of this well-known good reputation he was highly respected by the hunters and lumbermen and scattered settlers of the backwoods, and it was held a gross breach of the etiquette of the wilderness to molest him or disturb his nest. Even the fish he took—and he was a most tireless and successful fisherman—were not greatly grudged to him; for his chief depredations were upon the coarse-fleshed and always superabundant chub and suckers, which no human fisherman would be at the trouble to catch.

With all this good character to his credit, he was at the same time one of the handsomest of the great hawks. About two feet in length, he was of sturdy build, with immensely powerful wings whose tips reached to the end of his tail. All his upper parts were of a soft dark brown, laced delicately and sparsely with white, and the crown of his broad-skulled, intelligent head was heavily splashed with white. All his underparts

were pure white except the tail, which was crossed with five or six even bars of pale umber. His long and masterful beak, curved like a sickle and nearly as sharp, was black; while his formidable talons, able to pierce to the vitals of their prey at the first clutch, were of a clean grey-blue. His eyes, large and full-orbed, with a beautiful ruby-tinted iris encircling the intense black pupil, were gem-like in their brilliance, but lacked the implacable ferocity of the eyes of the eagle and the goshawk.

Presently, flying low over the crest of the hog-back with a gleaming mackerel in her talons, appeared his mate. Arriving swiftly at the nest, and finding the nestlings still asleep, she deposited the mackerel in a niche among the sticks, where it lay flashing back the sun from its blue-barred sides, and set herself to preening her feathers, still wet from her briny plunge. The male osprey, after a glance at the prize, seemed to think it was up to him to go her one better. With a high-pitched, musical, staccato cry of *Pip-pip—pip-pip—pip-pip—* very small and childish to come from so formidable a beak—he launched himself majestically from the edge of the nest and sailed off over the hot green tops of the spruce and fir to the lake.

Instead of soaring to his "watch-tower in the blue," he flew now quite low, not more than fifty feet or so above the water; for a swarm of small flies was over the lake, and the fish were rising to them freely. In every direction he saw the little widening rings of ripple, each of which meant a fish, large or small, feeding at the surface. His wide, all-discerning eyes could pick

and choose. Whimsically ignoring a number of tempting quarry, he winnowed slowly to the farther side of the lake, and then, pausing to hover just above the line where the water-lilies ended, he dropped suddenly, struck the water with a heavy splash, half submerging himself, and rose at once, his wings beating the spray, with a big silver chub in his claws. He had his prey gripped near the tail, so that it hung, twisting and writhing with inconvenient violence, head downwards. At about twenty-five or thirty feet above the water he let it go, and swooping after it caught it again dexterously in mid-air, close to the head, as he wanted it. In this position the inexorable clutch of his needle-tipped talons pierced the life out of the chub, and its troublesome squirming ceased.

Flying slowly with his solid burden, he had just about reached the centre of the lake when an ominous hissing in the air above warned him that his mighty foe, from far up in the blue dome, had marked his capture and was swooping down to rob him of the prize. He swerved sharply, and in the next second the eagle, a wide-winged, silvery-headed bird of twice his size, shot downward past him with a strident scream and a rustle of stiff-set plumes, swept under him in a splendid curve, and came back at him with wide-open beak and huge talons outspread. He was too heavily laden either to fight or dodge, so he discreetly dropped the fish. With a lightning swoop his tormentor caught it before it could reach the water, and flew off with it to his eyrie in a high, inaccessible ravine at the farthest end of the hog-back, several miles down the outlet stream. The osprey, taking quite

philosophically a discomfiture which he had suffered so many times before, stared after the magnificent pirate angrily for a few seconds, then circled away to seek another quarry. He knew that now he would be left in peace to enjoy what he might take.

But this time, in his exasperated anxiety more than to make good his loss, his ambition somewhat overreached itself. To borrow the pithy phrase of the backwoodsman, he "bit off more than he could chew."

One of those big grey lake-trout, or "togue," which, as a rule, lurk obstinately in the utmost depths, rose slowly to investigate the floating body of a dead swallow. Pausing a few inches below the surface, he considered as to whether he should gulp down the morsel or not. Deciding, through some fishy caprice, to leave it alone—possibly he had once been hooked, and broken himself free with a painful gullet!—he was turning away to sink lazily back into the depths when something like a thunderbolt crashed down upon the water just above him, and fiery pincers of horn fixed themselves deep into his massive back.

With a convulsive surge of his broad-fluked, muscular tail he tried to dive, and for a second drew his assailant clean under. But in the next moment the osprey, with a mighty beating of wings which thrashed the water into foam, forced him to the surface and lifted him clear. But he was too heavy for his captor, and almost immediately he found himself partly back in his own element, sufficiently submerged to make mighty play with his lashing tail. For all his frantic struggles, however, he could not again get clear under, so as to make

full use of his strength; and neither could his adversary, for all his tremendous flapping, succeed in holding him in the air for more than a second or two at a time.

And so the furious struggle, half upon and half above the surface, went on between these two so evenly-matched opponents, while the tormented water boiled and foamed and showers of bright spray leapt into the air. But the osprey was fighting with brains as well as with wings and talons. He was slowly but surely urging his adversary over toward that white beach below the hog-back, where, in the shallows, he would have him at his mercy and be able to end the duel with a stroke or two of his rending beak. If his strength could hold out till he gained the beach, he would be sure of victory. But the strain, as unusual as it was tremendous, was already beginning to tell upon him, and he was yet some way from shore.

His mate, in the meantime, had been watching everything from her high perch on the edge of the nest. At sight of the robber eagle's attack and his theft of the chub her crest feathers had lifted angrily, but she had made no vain move to interfere. She knew that such an episode was all in the day's fishing, and might be counted a cheap way of purchasing immunity for the time. When her gallant partner first lifted the big lake-trout into the air, her bright eyes flamed with fierce approval. But when she saw that he was in difficulties her whole expression changed. Her eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward intently with half-raised wings. A moment more, and she was darting with swift, short wing-beats to his help.

By the time she arrived the desperate combatants were nearing the shore, though the big fish was still resisting with undiminished vigour, while his captor, though undaunted, was beginning to show signs of distress. With excited cries of *Pip-pip, pip-pip*, she hovered close above her mate, seeking to strike her eager talons into his opponent's head. But his threshing wings impeded her, and it was some moments before she could accomplish it without hampering his struggles. At last she saw her opportunity, and with a lightning pounce fixed her talons upon the fish's head. They bit deep, and through and through. On the instant his struggles grew feeble, then died away. The exhausted male let go his hold and rose a few yards into the air on heavy wings; while his victorious mate flapped inwards to the beach, half carrying her prey, half dragging it through the water. With a mighty effort she drew it clear up on the silver sand. Then she dropped it and alighted beside it, with one foot firmly clutching it in sign of victory. Her mate promptly landed beside her, whereupon she withdrew her grip, in acknowledgment that the kill was truly his.

After a few minutes' rest, during which the male bird shook and preened his ruffled plumage into order, the pair fell to at the feast, tearing off great fragments of their prey and devouring them hastily, lest the eagle should return, or the eagle's yet more savage mate, and snatch the booty from them. Their object was to reduce it to a size that could be carried home conveniently to the nest. In this they were making swift progress when the banquet was interrupted. A long-limbed woodsman

in grey homespun, with a grizzled beard and twinkling grey-blue eyes, and a rifle over his shoulder, came suddenly into close view around a bend of the shore.

The two ospreys left their feast and flapped up into the top of a near-by pine tree. They knew the man, and knew him unoffending as far as they were concerned. He had been a near neighbour ever since their arrival from the south that spring, for his rough shack, roofed with sheets of whitish-yellow birch-bark, stood in full view of their nest and hardly two hundred paces from it. Furthermore, they were well accustomed to the sight of him in his canoe on the lake, where he was scarcely less assiduous a fisherman than themselves. But they were shy of him, nevertheless, and would not let him watch them at their feeding. They preferred to watch him instead, unafraid and quite unresentful, but mildly curious, as he strolled up to the mangled body of the fish and turned it over with the toe of his moccasined foot.

"Jee-hoshaphat!"¹ he muttered admiringly. "Who'd ever a' thought them there fish-hawks could a' handled a togue ez big ez that? Some birds!"

He waved a lean and hairy brown hand approvingly at the two ospreys in the pine-top, and then moved on with his loose-jointed stride up through the trees towards his shack. The birds sat watching him impassively, unwilling to resume their feast till he should be out of sight. And the big fish lay glittering in the sun, a staringly conspicuous object on the empty beach.

¹ It must be understood that this expression is a polite euphemism for the backwoodsman's too vigorous expletive.—
C. G. D. R.

But other eyes meanwhile—shrewd, savage, greedy eyes—had marked and coveted the alluring prize. The moment the woodsman disappeared around the nearest clump of firs, an immense black bear burst out through the underbrush and came slouching down the beach towards the dead fish. He did not hurry—for who among the wild kindreds would be so bold as to interfere with him, the monarch of the wild?

He was within five or six feet of the prey. Then there was a sudden rush of wind above his head—harsh, rigid wings brushed confusingly across his face—and the torn body of the fish, snatched from under his very nose, was swept into the air. With a squeal of disappointed fury he made a lunge for it, but he was too late. The female osprey, fresher than her mate, had again intervened in time to save the prize, and lifted it beyond his reach.

Now, under ordinary circumstances the bear had no grudge against the ospreys. But this was an insult not to be borne. The fish had been left upon the beach, and he regarded it as his. To be robbed of his prey was the most intolerable of affronts; and there is no beast more tenacious than the bear in avenging any wrong to his personal dignity.

The osprey, weighed down by her heavy burden, flew low and slowly toward the nest. Her mate flew just above her, encouraging her with soft cries of *Pip-pip-pip*, *pip-pip-pip*, *pip-pip-pip*; while the bear galloped lumberingly beneath, his heart swelling with vindictive wrath. Hasten as he would, however, he soon lost sight of them; but he knew very well where the nest was, having seen it many times in his prowlings,

so he kept on, chewing his plans for vengeance. He would teach the presumptuous birds that his overlordship of the forest was not lightly to be flouted.

After four or five minutes of clambering over a tangle of rocks and windfalls he arrived at the foot of the naked pine trunk which bore the huge nest in its crotch, nearly fifty feet above the ground. He paused for a moment to glare up at it with wicked eyes. The two ospreys, apparently heedless of his presence and its dreadful menace, were busily tearing fragments of the fish into fine shreds and feeding their hungry nestlings—*his* fish, as the bear told himself, raging at their insolent self-confidence. He would claw the nest to pieces from beneath, and devour both the nestlings themselves and the prey which had been snatched from him. He reared himself against the trunk and began to climb—laboriously, because the trunk was too huge for a good grip, and with a loud rattling of claws upon the dry, resonant wood.

At that first ominous sound the ospreys took alarm. Peering both together over the edge of the nest, they realised at once the appalling peril—a peril beyond anything they had ever dreamed of. With sharp cries of rage and despair they swooped downwards and dashed madly upon their monstrous foe. First one and then the other, and sometimes both together, they struck him, buffeting him about the face with their wings, stabbing at him in a frenzy with beak and talons. He could not strike back at them, but, on the other hand, they could make little impression upon his tough hide under its dense mat of fur. The utmost they could do

was to hamper and delay his progress a little. He shut his eyes and climbed on doggedly, intent upon his vengeance.

The woodsman, approaching his shack, was struck by that chorus of shrill cries, with a note in them which he had never heard before. From where he stood he could see the nest, but not the trunk below it. "Some-thin' wrong there!" he muttered, and hurried forward to get a better view. Pushing through a curtain of fir trees he saw the huge black form of the bear, now half-way up the trunk, and the devoted ospreys fighting madly, but in vain, to drive him back. His eyes twinkled with appreciation, and for half a minute or so he stood watching, while that shaggy shape of doom crept slowly upwards. "Some birds, sure, them fish-hawks!" he muttered finally, and raised his rifle.

As the flat crash of the heavy Winchester .38 startled the forest, the bear gave a grunting squawl, hung clawing for a moment, slithered downward a few feet, then fell clear out from the trunk and dropped with a thud upon the rock below. The frantic birds darted down after him, heedless of the sound of the rifle, and struck at him again and again. But in a moment or two they perceived that he was no longer anything more than a harmless mass of dead flesh and fur. Alighting beside him, they examined him curiously, as if wondering how they had done it. Then, filled with exultation over their victory, they both flew back to the nest and went on feeding their young.



MUSTELA OF THE LONE HAND

It was in the very heart of the ancient wood, the forest primeval of the North, gloomy with the dark green, crowded ranks of fir and spruce and hemlock, and tangled with the huge windfalls of countless storm-torn winters. But now, at high noon of the glowing Northern summer, the gloom was pierced to its depths with shafts of radiant sun; the barred and chequered transparent brown shadows hummed with dancing flies; the warm air was alive with the small, thin notes of chickadee and nuthatch, varied now and then by the impertinent scolding of the Canada jay; and the drowsing tree-tops steamed up an incense of balsamy fragrance in the heat. The ancient wilderness dreamed, stretched itself all open to the sun, and seemed to sigh with immeasurable content.

High up in the grey trunk of a half-dead forest giant was a round hole, the entrance to what had been the nest of a pair of big, red-headed, golden-winged woodpeckers, or "yellow-hammers." The big woodpeckers had long since been dispossessed—the female, probably, caught and devoured, with her eggs, upon the nest. The dispossessor, and present tenant, was Mustela.

Framed in the blackness of the round hole was a sharp-muzzled, triangular, golden-brown face with high, pointed ears, looking out upon the world below with keen eyes in which a savage wildness and an alert

curiosity were incongruously mingled. Nothing that went on upon the dim ground far below, among the tangled trunks and windfalls, or in the sun-drenched tree-tops, escaped that restless and piercing gaze. But Mustela had well fed, and felt lazy, and this hour of noon was not his hunting hour; so the most unsuspecting red squirrel, gathering cones in a neighbouring pine, was insufficient to lure him from his rest, and the plumpest hare, waving its long, suspicious ears down among the ground shadows, only made him lick his thin lips and think what he would do later on in the afternoon, when he felt like it.

Presently, however, a figure came into view at sight of which Mustela's expression changed. His thin black lips wrinkled back in a soundless snarl, displaying the full length of his long, snow-white, deadly-sharp canines, and a red spark of hate smouldered in his bright eyes. But no less than his hate was his curiosity—a curiosity which is the most dangerous weakness of all Mustela's tribe. Mustela's pointed head stretched itself clear of the hole, in order to get a better look at the man who was passing below his tree.

A man was a rare sight in that remote and inaccessible section of the Northern wilderness. This particular man—a woodsman, a "timber-cruiser," seeking out new and profitable areas for the work of the lumbermen—wore a flaming red-and-orange handkerchief loosely knotted about his brawny neck, and carried over his shoulder an axe whose bright blade flashed sharply whenever a ray of sunlight struck it. It was this flashing axe, and the blazing colour of the scarlet-and-orange kerchief,

that excited Mustela's curiosity—so excited it, indeed, that he came clean out of the hole and circled the great trunk, clinging close and wide-legged like a squirrel, in order to keep the woodsman in view as he passed by.

Engrossed though he was in the interesting figure of the man, Mustela's vigilance was still unsleeping. His amazingly quick ears at this moment caught a hushed hissing of wings in the air above his head. He did not stop to look up and investigate. Like a streak of ruddy light he flashed around the trunk and whisked back into his hole, and just as he vanished a magnificent long-winged goshawk, the king of all the falcons, swooping down from the blue, struck savagely with his clutching talons at the edge of the hole.

The quickness of Mustela was miraculous. Moreover, he was not content with escape. He wanted vengeance. Even in his lightning dive into his refuge he had managed to turn about, doubling on himself like an eel. And now, as those terrible talons gripped and clung for half a second to the edge of the hole, he snapped his teeth securely into the last joint of the longest talon and dragged it an inch or two in.

With a yelp of fury and surprise, the great falcon strove to lift himself into the air, pounding madly with his splendid wings and twisting himself about, and thrusting mightily with his free foot against the side of the hole. But he found himself held fast, as in a trap. Sagging back with all his weight, Mustela braced himself securely with all four feet and hung on, his whipcord sinews set like steel. He knew that if he

let go for an instant, to secure a better mouthful, his enemy would escape; so he just worried and chewed at the joint, satisfied with the punishment he was inflicting.

Meanwhile the woodsman, his attention drawn by that one sudden yelp of the falcon and by the prolonged and violent buffeting of wings, had turned back to see what was going on. Pausing at the foot of Mustela's tree, he peered upwards with narrowed eyes. A slow smile wrinkled his weather-beaten face. He did not like hawks. For a moment or two he stood wondering what it was in the hole that could hold so powerful a bird. Whatever it was, he stood for it.

Being a dead shot with the revolver, he seldom troubled to carry a rifle in his "cruisings." Drawing his long-barrelled "Smith and Wesson" from his belt, he took careful aim and fired. At the sound of the shot, the thing in the hole was startled and let go; and the great bird, turning once over slowly in the air, dropped to his feet with a feathery thud, its talons still contracting shudderingly. The woodsman glanced up, and there, framed in the dark of the hole, was the little yellow face of Mustela, insatiably curious, snarling down upon him viciously.

"Gee," muttered the woodsman, "I might hev knowed it was one o' them pesky martens! Nobody else o' *that* size 'ld hev the gall to tackle a duck-hawk!"

Now, the fur of Mustela, the pine-marten or American sable, is a fur of price; but the woodsman—subject, like most of his kind, to unexpected attacks of sentiment and imagination—felt that to shoot the defiant

little fighter would be like an act of treachery to an ally.

“Ye’re a pretty fighter, sonny,” said he, with a whimsical grin, “an’ ye may keep that yaller pelt o’ yourn, for all o’ me!”

Then he picked up the dead falcon, tied its claws together, slung it upon his axe, and strode off through the trees. He wanted to keep those splendid wings as a present for his girl in at the Settlements.

Highly satisfied with his victory over the mighty falcon—for which he took the full credit to himself—Mustela now retired to the bottom of his comfortable, moss-lined nest and curled himself up to sleep away the heat of the day. As the heat grew sultrier and drowsier through the still hours of early afternoon, there fell upon the forest a heavy silence, deepened rather than broken by the faint hum of the heat-loving flies. And the spicy scents of pine and spruce and tamarack steamed forth richly upon the moveless air.

When the shadows of the trunks began to lengthen, Mustela woke up, and he woke up hungry. Slipping out of his hole, he ran a little way down the trunk and then leapt, lightly and nimbly as a squirrel, into the branches of a big hemlock which grew close to his own tree. Here, in a crotch from which he commanded a good view beneath the foliage, he halted and stood motionless, peering about him for some sign of a likely quarry.

Poised thus, tense, erect and vigilant, Mustela was a picture of beauty swift and fierce. In colour he was of a rich golden brown, with a patch of brilliant yellow

covering throat and chest. His tail was long and bushy, to serve him as a balance in his long, squirrel-like leaps from tree to tree. His pointed ears were large and alert, to catch all the faint, elusive forest sounds. In length, being a specially fine specimen of his kind, he was perhaps a couple of inches over two feet. His body had all the lithe grace of a weasel, with something of the strength of his great-cousin and most dreaded foe, the fisher.

For a time nothing stirred. Then from a distance came, faint but shrill, the *chirr-r-r-r* of a red squirrel. Mustela's discriminating ear located the sound at once. All energy on the instant, he darted towards it, springing from branch to branch with amazing speed and noiselessness.

The squirrel, noisy and imprudent after the manner of his tribe, was chattering fussily and bouncing about on his branch, excited over something best known to himself, when a darting, gold-brown shape of doom landed upon the other end of the branch, not half a dozen feet from him. With a screech of warning and terror, he bounded into the air, alighted on the trunk, and raced up it, with Mustela close upon his heels. Swift as he was—and everyone who has seen a red squirrel in a hurry knows how he can move—Mustela was swifter, and in about five seconds the little chatterer's fate would have been sealed. But he knew what he was about. This was his own tree. Had it been otherwise, he would have sprung into another, and directed his desperate flight over the slenderest branches, where his enemy's greater weight would be a hindrance.

As it was, he managed to gain his hole—just in time—and all that Mustela got was a little mouthful of fur from the tip of that vanishing red tail.

Very angry and disappointed, and hissing like a cat, Mustela jammed his savage face into the hole. He could see the squirrel crouched, with pounding heart and panic-stricken eyes, a few inches below him, just out of his reach. The hole was too small to admit his head. In a rage he tore at the edges with his powerful claws, but the wood was too hard for him to make any impression on it, and after half a minute of futile scratching, he gave up in disgust and raced off down the tree. A moment later the squirrel poked his head out and shrieked an effectual warning to every creature within earshot.

With that loud alarm shrilling in his ears, Mustela knew there would be no successful hunting for him till he could put himself beyond the range of it. He raced on, therefore, abashed by his failure, till the taunting sound faded in the distance. Then his bushy brown brush went up in the air again, and his wonted look of insolent self-confidence returned. As it did not seem to be his lucky day for squirrels, he descended to earth and began quartering the ground for the fresh trail of a rabbit.

In that section of the forest where Mustela now found himself, the dark and scented tangle of spruce and balsam-fir was broken by patches of stony barren, clothed unevenly by thickets of stunted white birch, and silver-leaved quaking aspen, and wild sumach with its massive tufts of acrid, dark-crimson bloom. Here

the rabbit trails were abundant, and *Mustela* was not long in finding one fresh enough to offer him the prospect of a speedy kill. Swiftly and silently, nose to earth, he set himself to follow its intricate and apparently aimless windings, sure that he would come upon a rabbit at the end of it.

As it chanced, however, he never came to the end of that particular trail or set his teeth in the throat of that particular rabbit. In gliding past a bushy young fir tree, he happened to glance beneath it, and marked another of his tribe tearing the feathers from a new-slain grouse. The stranger was smaller and slighter than himself—a young female—quite possibly, indeed, his mate of a few months earlier in the season. Such considerations were less than nothing to *Mustela*, whose ferocious spirit knew neither gallantry, chivalry, nor mercy. With what seemed a single flashing leap he was upon her—or *almost*, for the slim female was no longer there. She had bounded away as lightly and instantaneously as if blown by the wind of his coming. She knew *Mustela*, and she knew it would be death to stay and do battle for her kill. Spitting with rage and fear, she fled from the spot, terrified lest he should pursue her and find the nest where her six precious kittens were concealed.

But *Mustela* was too hungry to be interested just then in mere slaughter for its own sake. He was feeling serious and practical. The grouse was a full-grown cock, plump and juicy, and when *Mustela* had devoured it his appetite was sated. But not so his blood-lust. After a hasty toilet he set out again, looking for something to kill.

Crossing the belt of rocky ground, he emerged upon a flat tract of treeless barren covered with a dense growth of blueberry bushes about a foot in height. The bushes at this season were loaded with ripe fruit of a bright blue colour, and squatting among them was a big black bear, enjoying the banquet at his ease. Gathering the berries together wholesale with his great furry paws, he was cramming them into his mouth greedily, with little grunts and gurgles of delight, and the juicy fragments with which his snout and jaws were smeared gave his formidable face an absurdly childish look. To Mustela—when that insolent little animal flashed before him—he vouchsafed no more than a glance of good-natured contempt. For the rank and stringy flesh of a pine-marten he had no use at any time of year, least of all in the season when the blueberries were ripe.

Mustela, however, was too discreet to pass within reach of one of those huge but nimble paws, lest the happy bear should grow playful under the stimulus of the blueberry juice. He turned aside to a judicious distance, and there, sitting up on his hindquarters like a rabbit, he proceeded to nibble, rather superciliously, a few of the choicest berries. He was not enthusiastic over vegetable food, but, just as a cat will now and then eat grass, he liked at times a little corrective to his unvarying diet of flesh.

Having soon had enough of the blueberry patch, Mustela left it to the bear and turned back toward the deep of the forest, where he felt most at home. He went stealthily, following up the wind in order that his scent might not give warning of his approach. It was getting

near sunset by this time, and floods of pinky gold, washing across the open barrens, poured in along the ancient corridors of the forest, touching the sombre trunks with stains of tenderest rose. In this glowing colour Mustela, with his ruddy fur, moved almost invisible.

And, so moving, he came plump upon a big buck-rabbit squatting half asleep in the centre of a clump of pale green fern.

The rabbit bounded straight into the air, his big, childish eyes popping from his head with horror. Mustela's leap was equally instantaneous, and it was unerring. He struck his victim in mid-air, and his fangs met deep in the rabbit's throat. With a scream the rabbit fell backwards and came down with a muffled thump upon the ferns, with Mustela on top of him. There was a brief, thrashing struggle, and then Mustela, his forepaws upon the breast of his still quivering prey—several times larger and heavier than himself—lifted his bloodstained face and stared about him savagely, as if defying all the other prowlers of the forest to come and try to rob him of his prize.

Having eaten his fill, Mustela dragged the remnants of the carcase under a thick bush, defiled it so as to make it distasteful to other eaters of flesh, and scratched a lot of dead leaves and twigs over it till it was effectually hidden. As game was abundant at this season, and as he always preferred a fresh kill, he was not likely to want any more of that victim, but he hated the thought of any rival getting a profit from his prowess.

Mustela now turned his steps homeward, travelling more lazily, but with eyes, nose, and ears ever on the

alert for fresh quarry. Though his appetite was sated for some hours, he was as eager as ever for the hunt, for the fierce joy of the killing and the taste of the hot blood. But the Unseen Powers of the wilderness, ironic and impartial, decided just then that it was time for Mustela to be hunted in his turn.

If there was one creature above all others who could strike the fear of death into Mustela's merciless soul, it was his great-cousin, the ferocious and implacable fisher. Of twice his weight and thrice his strength, and his full peer in swiftness and cunning, the fisher was Mustela's nightmare, from whom there was no escape unless in the depths of some hole too narrow for the fisher's powerful shoulders to get into. And at this moment there was the fisher's grinning, black-muzzled mask crouched in the path before him, eyeing him with the sneer of certain triumph.

Mustela's heart jumped into his throat as he flashed about and fled for his life—straightaway, alas, from his safe hole in the tree-top—and with the lightning dart of a striking rattler the fisher was after him.

Mustela had a start of perhaps twenty paces, and for a time he held his own. He dared no tricks, lest he should lose ground, for he knew his foe was as swift and as cunning as himself. But he knew himself stronger and more enduring than most of his tribe, and therefore he put his hope, for the most part, in his endurance. Moreover, there was always a chance that he might come upon some hole or crevice too narrow for his pursuer. Indeed, to a tough and indomitable spirit like Mustela's, until his enemy's fangs should finally lock

themselves in his throat, there would always seem to be a chance. One never could know which way the freakish Fates of the wilderness would cast their favour. On and on he raced, therefore, tearing up or down the long, sloping trunks of ancient windfalls, twisting like a golden snake through tangled thickets, springing in great airy leaps from trunk to rock, from rock to overhanging branch, in silence; and ever at his heels followed the relentless, grinning shape of his pursuer, gaining a little in the long leaps, but losing a little in the denser thickets, and so just about keeping his distance.

For all Mustela's endurance, the end of that race, in all probability, would have been for him but one swift, screeching fight, and then the dark. But at this juncture the Fates woke up, peered ironically through the grey and ancient mosses of their hair, and remembered some grudge against the fisher.

A moment later Mustela, just launching himself on a desperate leap, beheld in his path a huge hornets' nest suspended from a branch near the ground. Well he knew, and respected, that terrible insect, the great black hornet with the cream-white stripes about its body. But it was too late to turn aside. He crashed against the grey, papery sphere, tearing it from its cables, and flashed on, with half a dozen white-hot stings in his hindquarters prodding him to a fresh burst of speed. Swerving slightly, he dashed through a dense thicket of juniper scrub, hoping not only to scrape his fiery tormentors off, but at the same time to gain a little on his big pursuer.

The fisher was at this stage not more than a dozen paces in the rear. He arrived, to his undoing, just as the outraged hornets poured out in a furiously humming swarm from their overturned nest. It was clear enough to them that the fisher was their assailant. With deadly unanimity they pounced upon him.

With a startled screech the fisher bounced aside and plunged for shelter. But he was too late. The great hornets were all over him. His ears and nostrils were black with them, his long fur was full of them, and his eyes, shut tight, were already a flaming anguish with the corroding poison of their stings. Frantically he burrowed his face down into the moss and through into the moist earth, and madly he clawed at his ears, crushing scores of his tormentors. But he could not crush out the venom which their long stings had injected. Finding it hopeless to free himself from their swarms, he tore madly through the underbrush, but blindly, crashing into trunks and rocks, heedless of everything but the fiery torture which enveloped him. Gradually the hornets fell away from him as he went, knowing that their vengeance was accomplished. At last, groping his way blindly into a crevice between two rocks, he thrust his head down into the moss, and there, a few days later, his swollen body was found by a foraging lynx. The lynx was hungry, but she only sniffed at the carcase and turned away with a growl of disappointment and suspicion. The carcase was too full of poison even for her not too discriminating palate.

Mustela, meanwhile, having the best and sharpest of reasons for not delaying in his flight, knew nothing of

the fate of his pursuer. He only became aware, after some minutes, that he was no longer pursued. Incredulous at first, he at length came to the conclusion that the fisher had been discouraged by his superior speed and endurance. His heart, though still pounding unduly, swelled with triumph. By way of precaution he made a long detour to come back to his nest, pounced upon and devoured a couple of plump deer-mice on the way, ran up his tree and slipped comfortably into his hole, and curled up to sleep with the feeling of a day well spent. He had fed full, he had robbed his fellows successfully, he had drunk the blood of his victims, he had outwitted or eluded his enemies. As for his friends, he had none—a fact which to *Mustela* of the Lone Hand was of no concern whatever.

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Now, as the summer waned, and the first keen touch of autumn set the wilderness aflame with the scarlet of maple and sumach, the pale gold of poplar and birch, *Mustela*, for all his abounding health and prosperous hunting, grew restless with a discontent which he could not understand. Of the coming winter he had no dread. He had passed through several winters, faring well when other prowlers less daring and expert had starved, and finding that deep nest of his in the old tree a snug refuge from the fiercest storms. But now—he knew not why—the nest grew irksome to him, and his familiar hunting-grounds distasteful. Even the eager hunt, the triumphant kill itself, had lost their zest. He forgot to kill except when he was hungry. A strange fever was

in his blood, a lust for wandering. And so, one wistful, softly-glowing day of Indian summer, when the violet light that bathed the forest was full of mystery and allurements, he set off on a journey. He had no thought of why he was going, or whither. Nor was he conscious of any haste. When hungry, he stopped to hunt and kill and feed. But he no longer cared to conceal the remnants of his kills, for he dimly realised that he would not be returning. If running waters crossed his path, he swam them. If broad lakes intervened, he skirted them. From time to time he became aware that others of his kind were moving with him, but each one furtive, silent, solitary, self-sufficing, like himself. He heeded them not, nor they him; but all, impelled by one urge which could but be blindly obeyed, kept drifting onward toward the west and north. At length, when the first snows began, Mustela stopped, in a forest not greatly different from that which he had left, but even wilder, denser, more unvisited by the foot of man. And here, the *Wanderlust* having suddenly left his blood, he found himself a new hole, lined it warm with moss and dry grasses, and resumed his hunting with all the ancient zest.

Back in Mustela's old hunting grounds a lonely trapper, finding no more golden sable in his snares, but only mink and lynx and fox, grumbled regretfully:

"The marten hev quit. We'll see no more of 'em round these parts for another ten year."

But he had no notion why they had quit, nor had anyone else—not even Mustela himself.



MISHI

I

THE trail was not only steep and rough but at the same time slippery with the damp of spring, and the hunter, in that uncertain greyness of earliest dawn, had to pick his way with care. He was nearing the "timber line," after a sharp climb of half a mile from the high but sheltered valley wherein he had made camp the night before. The woods, a monstrous jumble of rocks and trunks, matted shrubs and gnarled, sinister roots which clutched like tentacles for a grip to hold them against the tearing mountain winds, began to open out before him, and he caught glimpses of the naked mountain face, scarred with tremendous ravines and scrawled across with crooked, dizzy ledges. Far and high, the eternal snows had caught the full flood of the sunrise, and every soaring crag and pinnacle stood bathed in a glory of ineffable pink and saffron.

Merivale stopped, and stood watching, with an impulse to uncover his head, while the transfiguring splendour spread slowly down the steeps. In his frequent hunting-trips from the East he had seen many such miracles of sunrise among the western mountains, but familiarity had not dulled his senses to them, and he was never able to take the wonder lightly. But as he gazed, the downward wash of that enchanted light suddenly

brought into view a shape which set Merivale's pulses leaping and made him straightway forget the sunrise. On the giddy tip of a crag which jutted out from the steep, stood perched a stately mountain ram, his noble head, with its massive, curled horns sweeping backwards over his shoulders, high uplifted as he searched the waste for any sign of danger to his ewes. This was the splendid game in quest of which Merivale had come up from the foot-hills. He crept forward again, stealthily and swiftly, keeping well beneath the cover of the branches.

Suddenly there burst upon his ears a sound which brought him to an instant stop. It was not loud, but as it came muffled through the gloom there was something monstrous and terrifying about it. The sound came from somewhere above Merivale's head and around to the left of where he crouched. It told him of a desperate struggle, of one of those tremendous battles to the death in which the beasts of the wild so rarely allow themselves to become involved. There was a heavy crashing and trampling of underbrush, a clattering of stones displaced by mighty feet, mingled with great, straining grunts and *woofs* of raging effort.

"Grizzlies, fighting!" muttered Merivale with amazement, and stole noiselessly toward the sound, rifle in readiness, eager to catch a glimpse of so titanic a duel. Then the noise was varied by a single harsh and terrible scream, after which the sounds of struggle went on as before. But now Merivale understood. "No, not grizzlies," he said to himself, "a grizzly and a puma." He had heard from the Indians of such tremendous

duels, but he had never expected to see one. His eyes shining with excitement, he hurried forward as quickly as he could without betraying himself. He quite forgot that in such a battle the great antagonists would be much too occupied to give heed to his approach. But it was slow work forcing his way through the rocky tangle, and the scene of the struggle proved to be farther away than he had guessed. Before he could reach the spot the noise of the battle came abruptly to an end, and there was no sound but a laboured, slobbery panting mixed with a hoarse whining which gave him an impression of mortal anguish. The next moment there came into view, lurching and staggering down the slope and blundering into the tree-trunks, a big grizzly, bleeding from head to haunch with ghastly wounds. His face was literally clawed to ribbons, and he was completely blinded. Moved by an impulse of mercy, Merivale lifted his rifle and sent an explosive bullet through the sufferer's spine. Then, very cautiously, he followed on up the grizzly's trail to see how it fared with his antagonist.

Some thirty or forty yards farther on Merivale came upon the puma, lying dead and mangled in the trail, its ribs crushed in and one great fore-arm wrenched from its socket. It was a female—clearly a mother in full milk. Merivale's sympathies were all with her, and as he stood looking down upon her and thought of the great fight she had put up against her huge adversary, he understood the whole situation. Clearly the wild mother had had her lair, and her helpless young, in some cleft of the rocks near by. She had seen the giant

bear coming up the trail to the den. She had sprung down to meet him and join battle before he should get too near, and had given her life, a vain sacrifice, for her little ones.

Merivale, by this time, had lost interest in the game which he had come so far to seek. What he wanted was to find the puma kittens which, as he had heard, were easily tamed. They would be a more novel trophy than the finest head ever worn by a mountain ram. But first, after studying the dimensions of the dead mother, he went back and carefully considered the proportions of the grizzly, pondering till he had reconstructed the whole terrific combat which he had been so unfortunate as to miss the sight of. Then he set forth to seek the orphaned little ones.

The search was difficult in that precipitous jumble of rocks and undergrowth; but presently the trail of the dead mother, which he had lost on a patch of naked rock lately swept by a landslide, revealed itself to him again. Just then, from almost over his head came an outburst of small but angry spittings, followed by a cat-like cry of agony. Furious at the thought that some prowler had reached the defenceless nest ahead of him, Merivale sprang forward and swung himself recklessly up upon the ledge where the noises came from.

There, straight before him, in a shallow, sheltered cave, with the sunrise just flooding full into it, was the puma's lair. The picture stamped itself in minutest detail on Merivale's memory. One puma kitten, about the size of a common tabby, lay outstretched dead. A big red fox was just worrying a second to death, having

seized it too near the shoulders, and so failed to break its neck at the first snap. The third and last kitten was spitting and growling, and clawing manfully but futilely at the thick rich fur of the slaughterer. It was evident that the battle between the grizzly and the mother-puma had been watched by the cunning fox, who, as soon as he saw the result, had realised that it would now be quite safe for him to visit the undefended den and capture an easy prey.

Filled with wrath, but afraid to shoot lest he should kill the remaining kitten, Merivale bounded forward with a yell and aimed a vindictive kick at the assassin. Needless to say, he missed his mark. He just saved himself from falling, and staggered heavily against the wall of the den, while the fox, not stopping to argue the matter and present his own point of view, slipped over the ledge and vanished, an indignant red streak, through the bushes.

Merivale eased his feelings with a few vigorous curses, then turned his attention to the valiant little survivor, which had backed away against the rock wall and was spitting and growling bravely at the new foe. In colour, unlike its unmarked, grey-tawny mother, it was of a bright yellowish fawn variegated with dark brown, almost black, spots, and its long tail—just now curled round in front and twitching defiantly—was ringed like a racoon's with the same dark shade.

Merivale, full of benevolence, reached out his hand to it gently, with soothing words such as he might have used to an angry but favoured cat. He got a vicious scratch from the furry baby claw.

"Plucky little hellyun," he muttered, approvingly, as he sucked the blood with scrupulous care from the wounds, realising that those baby claws might be far from hygienically innocent. Then, taking off his jacket, he dexterously caught the battling infant in its folds, rolling it over and over and swaddling down those rebellious claws securely, and leaving only the tiny black-and-pink muzzle free to spit its owner's indomitable protests.

With a bit of twine from his pocket he lashed the squirming bundle safely, but with tender consideration for the comfort of its occupant, tucked it under his arm, and turned to retrace his steps down to his camp in the valley.

Then it suddenly occurred to him that by and by the fox would return to the den for his prey. Being absurdly angry with that fox, he took the trouble to carry off the two dead kittens, tying them together and slinging them to his belt. His intention was to throw them into the torrent which brawled down the valley, in order to make quite sure the presumptuous fox should not profit by his kill.

For about a day the spotted youngster was irreconcilable: but hunger, and Merivale's tactful handling, soon brought it to terms. It took kindly to a diet of condensed milk, well diluted with warm water, and varied by a little raw rabbit or venison. It thrived amazingly, and by the time Merivale was ready to break camp and move back to his ranch on the skirt of the foot-hills it was as tame as a house-cat, and as devoted to its master as a Sealyham terrier.

II

Merivale treated his ranch in the western foot-hills—which was run the year round by a highly competent manager—chiefly as an excuse for a long summer's holiday and hunting.

It was not till the end of September that he started back east for his home in Nova Scotia, taking his puma cub—no longer to be called a kitten—with him. The cub, now nearly six months old, was approaching his full stature, and was a peculiarly fine specimen of his race. Having by this time lost the dark markings which adorn all puma cubs at their birth, he was of a beautiful golden fawn over the upper parts and creamy white beneath, with a line of darker hue along his backbone and a brown tip to his long and powerful tail. His ears and nose were black, which gave a finish to his distinguished colouring. In length he was close upon seven feet, counting his two-foot-six of tail. His height at the shoulder was a little under two feet.

In his play—which was always gentle, thanks to Merivale's wise training—he was the embodiment of lithe, swift strength. His savage inherited instincts having been lulled to sleep, or else never awakened, he was on the best of terms with all the dwellers upon the ranch, whether human or otherwise, the cattle alone excepted. These latter could never endure the sight or the smell of him, and very early in his career he had learned to regard them as his implacable enemies and keep carefully out of their way.

With the children on the ranch—there were four of them, belonging to the overseer—he was particularly popular, and to one, a long-legged little girl of about eleven, he was almost as devoted as to Merivale himself. She was alternately his playmate and his tyrant.

The name which Merivale had bestowed upon his pet was "Mishi," the word by which the puma or panther is known among the Ojibway Indians. He would answer to this name as promptly as a well-trained dog. He would also come to heel for his master, like a dog. In fact, under Merivale's training he acted much more like a dog than a cat, except that he would purr like an exaggerated cat when pleased, and wag his great tail in nervous jerks when annoyed.

The railway was a good half-day's journey from Merivale's ranch, and Mishi, who had never before seen a train, was terrified beyond measure by the windy snortings of the great transcontinental locomotive. He came near upsetting his master in his efforts to get between his legs for protection.

Merivale would have liked to have taken his favourite into the Pullman with him, but against any such proposal the guard, out of consideration for the feelings of nervous passengers, was obliged to set his face like steel. The young puma was therefore locked in an empty box-car, with a bed of clean straw, a supply of food and water, and his favourite plaything, a scratched and battered football, to console him.

But in spite of all this comfort, the long, long journey across the continent was a horror to the unwilling

traveller. The ceaseless jarring, swaying and roaring of the train set all his nerves on edge. He could only sleep when exhausted by hours of prowling up and down his narrow quarters. He would only eat—and then but a few hasty mouthfuls—when Merivale, at long intervals, came to pay him a visit during some extended halt of the train.

For the first time since his outburst of baby fury against the fox in his mountain den, he began to show signs of the savage temper inherited from his sires. He was homesick; he was desperately frightened; he was unspeakably lonely for his master. In revenge at last he fell upon the unoffending football, his old plaything, and with great pains and deliberation tore it to shreds.

But as luck would have it, Mishi's journey was brought to an abrupt and unforeseen end. It was late in the night, and Merivale was sleeping soundly in his berth, when the train stopped at a lonely backwoods station in the wild country that lies between the Lower St. Lawrence and the northern boundary of New Brunswick. A ragged tramp, seeking to steal a ride, crept noiselessly along the side of the train away from the station lights, and found the box-car. He was an old train-hand and knew how to open it.

But as the door slid smoothly back that tramp got the shock of his life. Something huge and furry struck him with a force which sent him sprawling clean across the metals and over into the ditch. At the same instant the engine snorted fiercely—she was on an up grade—and the wheels began to turn with a groaning growl.

Mishi went leaping off at top speed through the woods, doubly driven by the desire to find his master and by the terror of the panting, glaring locomotive. Deep in the spruce-woods he crouched at last, with pounding pulses, while the train, with Merivale asleep in his warm berth, thundered on steadily through the wilderness night.

III

As he lay there in the chill darkness, his nostrils drinking in the earthy scents of the wet moss and the balsamy fragrances of spruce and pine, faint ancestral memories began to stir in the young puma's brain, and his pupils dilated as he peered with a kind of savage expectancy through the shadows. He had long, long forgotten utterly the den upon the mountain-side, the caresses of his savage mother, and that last desperate battle with the marauding fox. But now dim, fleeting pictures of these things, quite uncomprehended, began to haunt and trouble him, and his long claws sheathed and unsheathed themselves in the damp moss. Suddenly realising that he was ravenously hungry he glanced around on every side, expecting with confidence to see his accustomed rations ready to hand. It took him several minutes to convince himself that his expectation was a vain one. Truly, life had changed indeed. He would have to find his food for himself. He rose slowly, stretched himself, opened his jaws in a terrific yawn, and set forth on the novel quest.

And now it was that Mishi's inherited wood-lore fully woke up and came effectively to his aid. Instead of crashing his way through the bushes, careless as to who should hear his coming, he crept forward as noiselessly as a cat, crouching low and sniffing the night air for a scent which should promise good hunting.

Suddenly he stiffened in his tracks and stood rigid, with one paw uplifted. A little animal, clearly visible to his eyes in spite of the darkness, was approaching. Resembling one of those big Jack-rabbits which Mishi had often chased (but never succeeded in catching) on the ranch, only much smaller, it came hopping along its runway, unconscious of danger. With an effort Mishi restrained himself from springing prematurely. Quivering with eagerness (for this was his first experience of real hunting) he waited till the rabbit was passing almost under his nose. Then out shot his great paw through the screening leafage—and the prize was his without a struggle, without so much as a squeak. Filled with elation at this easy success he made the sweetest meal of his life. As soon as his hunger was satisfied a great homesickness and longing for his master came over him. But this, of course, could not be allowed to interfere with his toilet. He licked his jaws and his paws scrupulously, washed his face and scratched his ears like a cat, then crept into the heart of the nearest thicket, curled himself up on the dry, aromatic spruce-needles and went to sleep. It was the first, real, sound, refreshing sleep that he had enjoyed since leaving the ranch.

The sun was high when Mishi woke up, opening

puzzled eyes upon a world entirely novel to him. Interspersed among the dark green fir trees stood a few scattered maples, glowing crimson and scarlet in their autumn bravery. These patches of radiant colour held Mishi's wandering attention for some moments till his thoughts turned to the more important question of breakfast. Instantly his whole manner and expression changed. He crouched with tense muscles, his eyes flamed and narrowed, his long white teeth showed themselves, and he began to creep noiselessly through the undergrowth, fully expecting another rabbit to come hopping into his path without delay. When this did not happen he began to grow angry. He had never been kept waiting for his breakfast before. There was something very wrong with this new world which he had been thrust into. Lifting up his voice he gave vent to a harsh and piercing scream, hoping that his master would hear and come to his rescue.

At the sound, with a sudden bewildering *whirr-rr-rr* of wings a covey of partridge sprang into the air, almost from under his nose, and went rocketing off through the trees. Mishi was so startled that he nearly turned a back somersault. Not lingering to investigate the alarming phenomenon he went racing off in the opposite direction like a frightened cat till his wind began to fail him. Then he huddled himself down behind a rock, craning his neck to peer around it nervously while he brooded over his wrongs. These however were presently forgotten under the promptings of his appetite, and he set forth again on his hungry prowl. Either by chance, or moved by a deep homing instinct, he turned his steps

westward. But suddenly from that direction came the long strident whistle of a train, wailing strangely over the tree-tops. At the sound, to him so fearful and so hateful, Mishi wheeled in his tracks and made off with more haste than dignity in the opposite direction. That dismal note stood to him for the cause of all his misfortunes.

At the bottom of his heart, however, the young puma, as he had shown in babyhood, was valiant and high mettled. It was only the unknown, the uncomprehended, that held terrors for him. And he was not one to dwell upon his fears. In a few moments he had forgotten them all in the excitement of sniffing at an absolutely fresh rabbit track. The warm scent reminded him of his last meal. He proceeded to follow up the trail with all stealth, little guessing that the rabbit, its eyes bulging with terror, was already hundreds of yards away and still fleeing. It had never dreamed that its familiar woodlands could harbour such an apparition of doom as this great, tawny, leaping monster with the eyes of pale flame.

It was not in Mishi's instinct to follow a trail long by the scent. Speedily growing discouraged, he hid himself beside the runway hoping that another rabbit would come along. When he had lain there motionless for perhaps ten minutes, his tawny colour blending perfectly with his surroundings, a couple of brown woodmice emerged from their holes and began to scurry playfully hither and thither among the fir needles. Mishi never so much as twitched a whisker as he watched them from the corner of his narrowed eyes. At last they

came within reach. Out flashed his swift paw, and crushed them both together. They made hardly a mouthful, but it was a tasty one; and Mishi settled down again to watch hopefully for more.

A few minutes later a red squirrel, one of the quickest-witted and most inquisitive of all the creatures of the wild, peering down through the branches, thought that he detected something strange in the shadowy, motionless figure far below. Nearer and nearer, circling noiselessly down the trunk, he crept, his big bright eyes ablaze with curiosity, till he was within a couple of yards of Mishi's tail. Then and not till then did he catch the glint of Mishi's narrowed eyes fixed upon him, and realise that the shadowy shape was something alive, a new and terrible monster. With a chattering shriek of wrath and fear he raced up the trunk again, and, dancing as if on wires in his excitement, began to shrill out his warning to all the forest dwellers.

In two seconds Mishi was up the tree, gaining the lower branches in one tremendous spring, and scrambling onwards like a cat, with a loud rattling of claws. But already the squirrel was several trees away, leaping from bough to bough and shrieking the alarm as he fled. It was taken up by every other squirrel within hearing, and by a couple of impudent blue jays who came fluttering over Mishi's head with screams of insult and defiance. Realising well enough that there could be no more secrecy for him in this neighbourhood, Mishi dropped to the ground and made off at a leisurely lope, pretending to ignore his tormentors. The latter followed him for nearly half a mile till at last, satisfied with

their triumph, they returned to their autumn business of gathering beechnuts.

The wanderer was by this time much too ravenous to brood over his discomfiture. He must find something to eat. Resuming his stealthy prowling he presently came to the edge of a little river, its gold-brown current gleaming and flashing in the sun. He was just about to creep down to it and quench his thirst when he saw a small blackish-brown creature, about the length of a rabbit, but shorter in the legs and very slim, emerge from the water and crawl forth upon the bank, dragging after it a glistening trout almost as big as itself.

Mishi had never seen a mink before, but he felt sure the little black animal would serve very well for his breakfast.

In this, however, he was mistaken. He little knew the mink's elusiveness. The mighty spring with which he launched himself through the screen of leafage was lightning swift—but when he landed the mink had vanished as completely as a burst bubble. But the fish was there; and, wasting no time in vain surprise, he bolted it head and tail. It was hardly a full meal for a beast of his inches, but it was enough to put him in a better humour with his fate.

He followed up on the shore for, perhaps, a quarter of a mile, half expecting to find another fish. Then, coming to a spot where the stream threaded with musical clamour through a line of boulders which afforded him a bridge, he crossed and crept again into the woods.

Almost immediately he came upon a well-beaten trail—a path which, as his nose promptly informed him,

had been made by the feet of man. Mishi's heart rose at the sight. Men, to him, meant friends and food and caresses, and above all, Merivale. With high hopes he trotted on up the path, till he emerged from the woods upon the edge of a wide, sunny clearing. Near the centre of the clearing stood a log cabin, flanked by a barn and a long, low shed. At one end of the cabin a clump of tall sunflowers flamed golden in the radiant air. From the cabin chimney smoke was rising, and a most hospitable smell of pork and beans greeted Mishi's nostrils. He bounded forward joyously, thinking all his troubles at an end.

But at this very instant a big red cock, scratching on the dungheap beside the barn, caught sight of the strange tawny shape emerging from the woods.

"Kree-ee-ee!" he shrilled at the top of his piercing voice, and "Kwit-kwit-kwit-kree-ee-ee!" his signal of most urgent warning and alarm. With squawks of fright all his hens scurried to cover—though he himself, consumed with curiosity, valiantly stood his ground. A black-and-white cur popped round the corner of the barn, stared for a couple of seconds as if unable to believe his eyes, then raced, *ki-yi-ing* with horror, towards the cabin door, his tail between his legs.

The door flew open, and a stout woman, in a grey, homespun petticoat, with a red handkerchief twisted over her hair and a bright tin pan in her hands, peered forth to see what all the noise was about.

"My lands!" she ejaculated, dropping the pan with a loud clatter, and jumped back into the kitchen again, slamming the door in the very face of the black-and-

white cur, who thereupon fled around behind the house with a yelp of despair.

This was by no means the kind of welcome which Mishi had been expecting, and he paused for a moment, feeling bewildered and rebuffed. Then a new whiff of pork and beans came to his nostrils, and he started forward again, but now more diffidently. He felt no longer any hope of finding his master in that inhospitable cabin.

Fortunately for him, he was still at some distance from the cabin when the small window beside the door was thrown open, and the stout woman appeared at it with her goodman's shot-gun. She was a woman of resource, and knew that her husband always kept the gun loaded—though *how* it was loaded she had never troubled to inquire. Had she been fully aware of the fact that it was loaded for partridges the knowledge would have made no difference to her action.

In her eyes a gun was a gun, and a load was a load, whether bullet, slugs, or snipe-shot. She thrust the muzzle out through the window, pointing it vaguely at Mishi, who looked at her in mild appeal, and then lay down and rolled to show his friendliness. It was an accomplishment which, in the good old days, had never failed to win approval and caresses. But it was quite lost on the stout woman at the window. She lifted the butt of the gun to her shoulder as she had seen her husband do, and pulled the trigger.

The recoil of the loosely-held weapon so staggered her that she fell backwards over a tub of water, upset a bench with a pile of dishes on it, and screeched in

terror, thinking the gun had exploded and probably killed her.

By some miracle—for the stout woman had made no attempt to aim—a couple of flying pellets grazed one of Mishi's forepaws as it waved conciliatorily in the air. At the crashing report, the clatter, the shriek, and the burning sting of the wound in his paw, Mishi bounced to his feet and went bounding away into the kindly shelter of the forest, his heart bursting with injury.

The black-and-white cur, reappearing from behind the cabin, capered across the barn-yard with a peal of triumphant yelps, proclaiming that he, himself, had put the dread intruder to flight; while the red cock, after eyeing the futile little animal with scorn, flew up to the top of the wood-pile and crowed.

The sting in Mishi's wounded foot, as well as in his wounded feelings, now kept him going, not fast but steadily, till he had put many miles between him and the scene of his rebuff.

He crossed several rippling, amber streams, overhung with golden birches, and the wax vermilion clusters of the rowanberries.

Not till about sunset did he think about hunting again, and settle down to a stealthy prowling; and in the meantime, sharp eyes, wary and hostile or shy and horrified, all unknown to him had marked his progress. Fox and weasel, mink and woodchuck and tuft-eared lynx, all had seen him, and recognised a new and terrible master in the wilderness; and even the indifferent porcupine, secure in his armour of deadly quills, had paused in his gnawing at the hemlock-bark and quivered with

apprehension as the tawny shape went by. Some ancient instinct warned him that here was a foe who might be clever enough to undo him.

But to Mishi's untrained senses the bright forest, all this while, had seemed quite empty. When he hid himself, however, it soon grew populous again, and faint unfamiliar sounds began to make themselves heard. Not yet being woods-wise he paid no heed to them. But suddenly his attention was caught by a noise which excited him at once, though he knew not why.

It was a confused sound of tramlings and stampings and snortings, with now and then a flat clatter as of sticks beaten against each other.

With a strange thrill in his nerves he crept forward and presently found himself staring out, through fringing bushes, upon a duel between two red bucks in the centre of a little forest glade. It was rutting season, and the high-antlered bucks were fighting for the possession of three plump, mild-eyed does, who, quite indifferent to the result, were calmly pasturing at the farther end of the glade.

For perhaps a minute Mishi watched the fight with a wondering interest, heightened perhaps by the first stirrings of the mating fever in his own veins. Then hunger overcame all other emotions. With a mighty leap he landed upon the shoulder of the nearest buck, bearing him to the ground. At the same time, taught by generations of deer-killing ancestors, he clutched the victim's head with one great paw and twisted it back so violently as to dislocate the neck. With eyes bulging from their heads in horror the remaining buck and the

does crashed off through the woods, leaving the dreadful stranger to his meal.

IV

For several days Mishi remained near his kill, which he had instinctively dragged into a hiding-place behind a fallen tree. He feasted his fill, slept a good deal, explored the neighbourhood of his lair, and began to feel more or less at ease in his new surroundings. Natural instincts rapidly sprang to life in him as he sniffed at strange trails, and he came to realise that the apparently empty forest was full of good hunting, if only he went about the right way to find it. At length, growing tired of the remains of the buck, and the homesickness for his master being again strong upon him, he set forth once more on his quest, working steadily southward and westward, and hunting, with daily increasing skill, as he went. His fare was chiefly rabbits, with an occasional fat wood-chuck. Once he succeeded in pouncing upon a fox, but disliking its musky odour, he left the carcase uneaten.

And once he came face to face with a big black bear, who was grubbing for beetles in the debris of an old stump. The bear did not like the look of him at all; but neither did he like the look of the bear. Each of the two eyed the other with well-assumed indifference for some moments, unwilling to defer but equally unwilling to risk a trial of strength. At last Mishi, who vaguely felt himself a trespasser, turned a little aside,

sat down upon his haunches, and fell to scratching his ears with one hind paw in an absent-minded manner, as if he had forgotten the bear's existence. The bear, feeling his dignity satisfied by this concession, appeared to remember that he had business to attend to somewhere else, and slowly moved away. When he was quite out of sight Mishi resumed his journey, but with a discreet change of direction.

It was not until one night well on in October that Mishi made the acquaintance of the real monarch of the northern wilds, the great bull moose. His appetite on edge in that keen, tonic air, he was stealthily skirting the shore of a wide, lonely lake, keeping well out of sight behind the fringing undergrowth, hoping to pounce on some unwary doe as she came down the beach to drink. The moon was at the full, a great honey-coloured globe hanging low over the low, black, jagged line of the farther shore, and flooding the unruffled surface of the lake with a long wash of glassy radiance.

About a hundred yards ahead a tall beast, looking to Mishi's eyes like an enormous hornless deer with overgrown head and shoulders, came suddenly forth from the woods, strode slowly down the wide beach and stood close to the water's edge, black against the moon. Stretching out her heavy muzzle over the water, she gave utterance to a strange call—long, hoarse, sonorous—which went echoing uncouthly over the solitude. She repeated the call several times, and then stood motionless as if waiting for an answer. Mishi had no conception of the fact that the strange cry was the call of the cow moose to her mate.

The tall beast did not look to Mishi like easy game, by any means, but being both hungry and self-confident, he crept forward, seeking a closer inspection before making up his mind whether or not to risk the attack. Suddenly a dry twig snapped close behind him. He wheeled like a flash, saw a monstrous, black, wide-antlered form towering over him—and leaped aside like a loosed spring just as a huge knife-edged hoof came smashing down upon the spot where he had stood. That stroke would have shattered his backbone like an egg-shell.

The blow was followed by an instant, crashing charge, resistless as an avalanche; but Mishi had not waited for it. He was up a tree in one desperate bound. Badly shaken, he crouched upon a branch at a safe height, spitting and growling harshly, the hair on his long, lashing tail standing out like a toothbrush. For perhaps five minutes the giant bull raged below, stamping his great cleft hooves which clacked like castanets, thrashing the underbrush with his vast and massive antlers, and sometimes rearing against the trunk and striking upwards with his hooves to such a height that Mishi prudently removed to a loftier branch. Then once more from the edge of the shining water came that long call, hoarse but desirous. The furious bull forgot his rage, the stiff mane standing up along his neck relaxed, and he went crashing off through the undergrowth, ardent to respond to that alluring summons. From his high perch Mishi had a clear view of the meeting, but he had no interest in it as a love-scene. As soon as he felt sure that his gigantic foe was fully occupied he dropped

to the ground and slunk away in haste, his self-esteem shrivelled to a cinder.

About a week later—and Mishi had travelled far since his interview with the moose—on a golden afternoon of Indian summer, he came out upon a rough country road, rutted with wheel marks and pitted with the prints of horses' hooves. At the familiar sight and scent his thoughts went back longingly to his master, to the ranch and his kind friends there, to his frolics with the children of the overseer, and, especially, to that little girl who used to pull his ears, and who always had something nice for him in the pockets of her pinafore. He hated the lonely, unfriendly wilderness, where monstrous moose-bulls charged at him unprovoked, and disagreeable women fired guns at him from windows. He ached for companionship. He wanted to be made much of. He lay down at full length in the middle of the road, and sniffed at the tracks, and dreamed. A sound of light footfalls, accompanied by a metallic rattling noise, aroused him. Two children—a long-legged, sandy-haired little girl in a short red frock, white apron, and pink sun-bonnet, and a stumpy little boy in blue-grey homespun and an old yellow straw hat—came loitering down the road, swinging a tin dinner-pail between them. Mishi was overjoyed. His dreaming had come true. That little girl looked very like his chief playmate on the ranch. He bounced to his feet and ran to meet them, prancing like a gigantic kitten in his delight.

At this appalling apparition the two children dropped the dinner-pail with a loud clatter, stood for one second

with eyes starting from their heads, then turned and fled for their lives.

But it was instantly apparent to the little girl, who was the elder of the pair, that her short-legged brother could not keep up with her. With a gasp she swooped back to him, snatched his hand, and began to drag him onwards. The stuff of heroes flowed in the veins beneath her freckled skin.

To Mishi the children's flight was all in the game. On the ranch he had been accustomed to chase the children, till they grew tired of running away, when they would turn and chase him, after which he would throw himself down and they would all fall over him. He had been severely taught by Merivale never to be rough in this play. Now he overtook the children, brushed past them, and careered on ahead. The little boy stumbled and fell down, his knees giving way beneath him in his terror, as in a nightmare. The little girl stopped short with a dry sob of anguish, and stood over him, confronting, as she thought, instant death. She shook her apron at Mishi and cried tremulously, "Go 'way! scat!"

To her amazement the great tawny beast, instead of pouncing upon her, at the sound of her voice sat up like a pussy-cat and began to purr—a mighty sound, but even to her horrified ears an unmistakable purr. She stared with all her eyes. Again she cried "Scat!"—this time with a little more confidence. It was an unfamiliar word to Mishi, and he could not make out what was expected of him. In his uncertainty he played his trump card. He lay down in the road and began to

roll, with all four great furry paws waving childishly in the air.

The long-legged little girl was not only heroic of heart, as we have seen. She was also clear-headed and of a quick understanding. She dragged her brother to his feet.

"Why, Freddy, see!" she exclaimed, steadying her voice. "He ain't a-goin' to hurt us. He *likes* us. He wants us to play with him." Suddenly she recalled the story of Androcles and the lion, which she had read in one of her school-books. "Don't you remember that man *Androckles* that the big lion loved so?"

Her terror slipped away from her.

"Puss! Puss!" she cried. "Nice Pussy!" and stretched out her free hand, while with the other she thrust Freddy a little behind her. Even to Freddy the great beast began to look less formidable, and he stopped crying to stare with wondering interest.

Mishi understood the invitation of the little girl's voice, and the outstretched, grimy hand. He drew gently nearer. But he had begun to see that, for some reason, the children were afraid of him. So to assure them of his good will, he stopped to roll again at every other step. As soon as he got near enough the little girl, with inward trepidation but outward firmness, patted him on the head, and then, as if by a flash of insight, pulled his ears gently but authoritatively.

In an ecstasy, Mishi rubbed his head against her scratched and sunburnt legs, purring louder than ever. He felt that all his woes were at an end, and that no doubt the children would lead him home to Merivale.

The little boy, in a violent revulsion from his terrors, began to laugh, and flung his arms round Mishi's neck, rubbing his face into the warm, tawny fur.

"Wasn't we silly, Sadie," he demanded, "to be so scared?"

"I wasn't so *very* scared!" responded the little girl, proudly and untruthfully.

"P'raps we kin coax him home with us an' keep him?" suggested Freddy.

The little girl pursed up her mouth doubtfully.

"Wish to goodness we could," she agreed, embracing the happy Mishi with ardour. "But you know we darsen't. Mother'd raise an awful row!"

But on this point she had no choice. Mishi absolutely refused to leave them. He stuck to them like a burr, rubbing himself against them and from time to time eyeing them with anxious appeal. He was desperately afraid they might vanish and leave him again to his hateful solitude.

The little grey, backwoods farmhouse of the Atkinson family, with its wide farmyard enclosed by two big barns and a long woodshed, looked very comforting to Mishi as it lay basking in the afternoon sunshine. He felt that he had come home. The kitchen door was flung open, and a woman appeared—a gaunt, lean-featured woman, soured by household cares. At the sight of Mishi her sallow face went white, and her mouth opened for a shriek. But seeing that the children were evidently on the best of terms with the formidable-looking beast, her terror gave way to shrill wrath. She hated household pets of every kind, while the children,

encouraged by their father, were somewhat recklessly addicted to them.

"What d'you mean?" she demanded, "bringing a great big dirty brute like that home with you, to mess up the house and jest make more work for me? Jest like yer father! No more consideration——" But Sadie's clear little voice interrupted the tirade.

"I think it's a lion, mother—a *tame* lion," she explained soothingly. "An' he's so good an' kind, and jest loves us. An' he's took care of us all the way home. An' we *couldn't* make him go 'way. An' we thought Daddy'd be so——" But here her tact had failed her, and the good woman broke in shrilly: "*Daddy!* Oh yes, always *Daddy!* Precious little ye'd think of your poor *mother*, breakin' her back to feed yez all, an' keep the house clean, an' doin' the work o' three men with the cows an' the milk. No, I tell you, you ain't a-goin' to bring that brute in here. No, you——" but Mishi already had his head inside the kitchen door, sniffing at the savoury smells. "*Git out*, you brute!" she screamed, retreating behind the door and making a pass at the purring intruder with her broom.

The children dragged the happy and unresisting animal away from the door.

"All right, mother. We'll tie him up in the cow-shed till Daddy comes home. Don't be frightened."

"I ain't frightened!" screamed Mrs. Atkinson, slamming the door indignantly, but opening it again at once as she realised that she was shutting the children out alone with the awful beast. "But I'll have you know I won't have that ugly brute around the place.

It'll be eating the chickens, first thing ye know. I'll make your father shoot it when he gits home, see if I don't!"

The children looked at each other with an understanding grin.

"After we've tied him up," whispered Sadie, "we'll get him something to eat—or he *might* eat the chickens, poor dear, coz I don't expect he'd know any better."

The little boy looked doubtful.

"Milk?" he queried, being a child of few words.

"We'll get him a pan of milk *now*," replied his sister, always practical. "An' Daddy'll know what to give him when he gits home."

They got a piece of clothes' line—of which there is always plenty on a backwoods farm—and they tied up the puzzled Mishi, as they thought, securely in a corner of the warm, shadowy barn, with plenty of sweet-smelling hay to lie on. Then, having fondled him and tried to assure him that they would be back "right away" with food, they departed, leaving the barn-door open lest he should feel lonely.

For a minute or two Mishi lay quite still, listening to the rustle of mice in the hay, and watching the long, bright streak of dusty sunlight that came through the cracks in the warped boarding of the barn. Presently he heard the sound of wheels, of trotting hooves. He pricked up his ears eagerly. How often, on the ranch, had such sounds meant the return of Merivale from a trip to the station! He heard the wagon stop—his ears told him exactly where—outside the other barn.

He heard a man jump out. He heard the hollow noise of horse and wagon being led in upon the barn floor. A few moments later a man came into view, striding towards the kitchen door—a tall man like Merivale, wearing an old brown slouch hat like Merivale's, and carrying a gun and a brace of partridges. He wrenched his head from its too loose collar of rope, and went bounding happily forth to greet the new arrival.

At sight of the huge, tawny beast leaping towards him so swiftly an anguish of hideous question flashed through the man's mind in the fraction of a second, and turned his blood to ice. Where were the children? Where was his wife? He whipped the gun to his shoulder. The great beast was within a dozen feet of him. He fired. At that close range the charge of small shot was like an explosive bullet. It tore a hole clean through Mishi's chest and out between the shoulders.

Mishi crumpled up, dropped in his tracks, and lay still, a sprawled mass of bright, tawny fur in the late afternoon's sunshine, his lonely quest come to an end.

The kitchen door flew open, and the children, rushing past their father, flung themselves, weeping passionately, on Mishi's body.

"Oh, Daddy, Daddy, how *could* you?" wailed Sadie. "You've killed our kind lion!" Behind the children came Mrs. Atkinson. She was seized with a pang of inconsistent remorse.

"Jest like you, Jim A'kinson!" she burst forth. "That there poor beast wouldn't 'ave hurt a fly. He brung the children home from school and took keer

of 'em jest like a big dog. An' they thought you'd be so sot on him!"

The man took off his slouch hat and scratched his head.

"I wish to thunder I'd known!" he muttered regretfully.





THE WINGED SCOURGE OF THE DARK

THE windless grey-violet dusk, soft as mole's fur, brooded low over the bushy upland pasture. In the shallow valley below a gleam of yellow lamp-light shone steadily from the kitchen window of the little backwoods farmhouse. Faint, comfortable sounds floated up on the still air from the low-roofed barn, where the two horses, resting after a hard day's work, revelled in their generous feed of oats. There was a soft creaking, a rattle, and a splash, as the farmer's wife, a dim grey figure, drew a bucket of water from the deep well in the centre of the farmyard. From a patch of alder swamp beyond the brook which threaded the valley a bull-frog uttered his hoarsely mellow croak, repeating it several times with subtle variations, as if trying to improve the note. Twilight and the dewfall hushed the world to peace.

In the rough upland pasture, among the scattered stumps and patches of juniper and young fir-seedlings, some five or six brown rabbits were at play in the sheltering dusk like care-free children. They went leaping softly this way and that, passing and repassing each other in what looked almost like the set figures of a dance. At intervals one of the furry little players would stop short and thump heavily with his strong hind-paws upon the firm, close-cropped turf, producing

a curious dully resonant sound. At the signal all the other players would turn about, as if on drill, and continue the game with what looked like a new figure.

In the midst of this furry merry-making, from the dark woods which overhung the back and northern side of the pasture came a strange and ominous voice. *Whuh-whoo-oo, whuh-whoo-oo*—deep-toned, long-drawn, sonorous, and thrilling with an indescribable menace, it sounded twice across the quiet dusk.

At the first note the play of the rabbits stopped short, as if all the players had been smitten instantaneously into stone. In the next half-second the majority of them darted frantically into the shelter of the nearest bushes, with a momentary flicker of white tail-fluffs as they vanished. The rest, as if too panic-stricken to move, or else fearing the revelation of movement, simply crouched flat where they were, motionless save for the wild pounding of their frightened hearts. Their shadowy fur melting perfectly into the dusk and the shadowy turf, so long as they kept still they were as invisible as their companions who had found refuge under the bushes. And still they kept, as if frozen.

It was perhaps half a minute later when a great dim form, as noiseless as the passing of a cloud-shadow, came winnowing low, on downy wings, over the bushes of the silent pasture. It seemed but a fragment of denser dusk come alive—except for its dreadful eyes. These eyes—great, round, palely-shining globes—searched the thickets and the open spaces with deadly intentness, as their owner swept hither and thither with his head

stooped low, on the watch for any slightest motion or sign of life. But nothing stirred.

Then, just as the dim shape drifted over the open space where the rabbits were crouching, it opened its sickle-shaped beak and gave forth a sudden piercing cry, terrible and startling. This was too much for the overstrung nerves of the crouching rabbits. They sprang into the air as if shot, and leaped frantically for the bushes. The dim form swooped, struck, and the nearest fugitive felt himself clutched in neck and back by knife-edged talons hard as steel. He gave one short scream of terror, strangled on the instant. Then he was swept into the air, kicking spasmodically. And the dim shape bore him off into the deep of the woods, to the hollow tree where its fierce mate and savage nestlings had their home.

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The great horned owl alighted with his prey on a stout, naked branch which stood out conveniently beside the spacious hole in the ancient, half-dead maple tree which formed his dwelling. He laid the limp body of the rabbit across the edge of the nest, half in the hole and half out of it, and with a curious, formal bobbing of his fiercely-tufted head he sidled up close to his mate, softly snapping his hooked beak by way of greeting, and giving utterance to a low twittering sound that seemed ridiculously unsuitable to such a ferocious countenance as his. His mate, larger than he and even more savage-looking, had herself just returned from a successful hunt, laden with a luckless duck from some

backwoods farmyard. Her two owlets, nearly half-grown, but still downy, were tearing greedily at the duck and bolting huge mouthfuls of it, feathers and all. She herself had already satisfied her appetite, having probably gulped down two or three mice and small birds, captured on the edge of twilight, before bringing home the duck to her brood. She was not so unselfish as her mate, who, bloodthirsty and insatiable marauder though he was, could boast, nevertheless, of no small domestic virtue. A model spouse and father, he seldom consulted his own needs till he was sure that his mate and his young were fed. Now, having assured himself that all were supplied, he turned again to his prey. Holding it down with both feet securely, he tore the skull apart with his sharp and powerful beak, and devoured first the head, which he considered the choicest morsel, bolting it, bones and all. In the meantime his mate, moved purely by the hunting lust, had sailed noiselessly from her perch and winnowed off between the dark and silent tree-trunks to seek for other prey.

Having swiftly and voraciously satisfied his appetite, the great owl wiped his crimsoned beak on the edge of the nest, sat up very erect, and for a few moments watched solemnly his youngsters still tearing at the carcase of the duck. He was massively built, broad-breasted, and about two feet in length from the tip of his short, broad tail to the crown of his big, round head, with its two fierce, hornlike ear-tufts. In colour he was a mixture of soft browns, greys, and fawns above, distributed irregularly in vague bars and splashes, while below he was of a creamy buff, delicately barred

with deep chocolate. The wide, circular discs of flat feathering which surrounded his eyes were cream-white, shading into fawn, and between them came down a frowning, pointed brow of darker feathers. His eyes, extraordinarily bright and cruel, were enormous, as round as full moons, of a gem-like yellow, with great staring pupils of jetty black. They were fixed in their sockets—as with all owls—so that when he wished to turn them he had to turn his whole head with them. His look was always a full-faced stare, challenging and tamelessly savage. His legs and feet were thickly and softly feathered in white, right down to those inexorable horn-coloured talons whose clutch could throttle a full-grown goose in a few seconds.

To ordinary ears, of man or beast, the silence of the forest at this hour was absolute. But to the great owl's super-sensitive ear-drums—veritable microphones they were—the darkness was filled with innumerable furtive sounds. A far-off beech-leaf, suddenly unburdening itself of a gathering load of dew, spoke loudly, though without significance, to him. He caught the infinitesimal whisper of crowded young twigs as they occasionally stretched themselves in their growth. Down in the thick earth-darkness close to the ground, perhaps fifty feet away, he detected the stealthy, padded footfalls of a prowling lynx, so light as to be scarcely audible to their owner himself. Without moving his body he turned his head in the direction of the sound and stared intently. The lynx, a brilliant tree-climber, was one of the very few wild creatures whom he feared, and he held himself in tense readiness to signal for his absent mate and do

battle, if necessary, for his nest and young. But the sinister footfalls crept off in another direction, and he knew that his home—which was well concealed from the ground by a bushy growth of Indian pear and wild viburnum—had not been discovered.

A minute or two later the grim listener on his high listening-post detected a fairy rustling which was not of stretching twigs or dew-laden leaves. It came from under a fir thicket some fifty or sixty yards away, and so faint it was that other ears than his could scarce have caught it at a distance of ten paces. But he knew it at once for the scurrying of the shy little wood-mice over the floor of the dead and crisp fir-needles. On downy wings he dropped from his perch and sailed, swift and soundless as thought, straight in beneath the overhanging fir branches. His outstretched talons struck, like lightning, in two directions at once—and in one successfully. In that annihilating clutch a furry little life went out, without time for even a squeak of protest. The unerring hunter swept on without a pause, and rose to the nearest convenient limb. Settling himself there for a moment, he lifted his tiny victim in one claw—like a parrot eating a biscuit—bit off its head daintily and swallowed it with an air of appreciating a tit-bit, and then bolted the body at one careless gulp. A few seconds later he was back again upon his home perch, sitting upright as stiffly as a sentry at salute, his great eyes flaming spectrally through the dark.

And now thin pencils of pale light began to penetrate the uppermost branches of the trees, giving an ink-

black edge to the shadow below. As the first slender ray reached him, the great owl opened his beak and ruffled up the feathers about his neck.

Whuh-whoo-oo, whuh-whoo-oo-oo, he called—a hollow, long-drawn cry all on one deep note, which seemed to come from several different quarters of the darkness at once. It was impossible, indeed, for any of the timid lurkers in the coverts, who listened to it with quivering hearts, to make out just where it did come from. But his far-off mate heard it, and knew. And from somewhere away beyond the other side of the pasture came the response, muffled by distance and ghostly dim—*Whuh-whoo-oo-oo-oo*. It signified to him that she was on her way back to the nest. He waited motionless perhaps half a minute, glanced at the two owlets who sat solemnly in the doorway of the nest, digesting their heavy meal, and then sailed off through the silvering tree-tops to hunt fresh victims about the pasture-lands and clearings.

As he emerged into the open country, his soundless passing, through the strange, distorting light of the low moon, was like that of a spectre, but, unlike a spectre, he swept along with him a twisting and writhing shadow which gave warning of his approach. Mice, rabbits, chipmunks, even the dauntless and furious weasels, slipped to cover. The field was as empty as a desert, except for one big black-and-white striped skunk, which glanced up at him unconcernedly and went on digging up a mouse-nest. Tyrant and assassin though he was, and audacious as he was murderous, and more than a match in beak and talons for several skunks at once, he had no inclination

to come to close quarters with this self-assured little striped creature which carried such an armoury of choking poison under its tail. He swerved sullenly off to the edge of the woods again, and continued his flight along beneath their shadow till he reached the edge of the brook which flowed behind the farmyard. Here he dropped upon a momentarily unwary frog which was sitting, half-submerged, at the water's edge. He carried it to a near-by stump and swallowed it whole. Then his ears caught a soft, sleepy twittering from among the branches of a straggling thorn-bush some twenty or thirty yards down-stream. A sudden ray from the moon, just rising over the hill, had awakened a sleeping song-sparrow, and he had murmured some drowsy endearments to his mate, who sat brooding her half-fledged nestlings close beside him. The next instant a monstrous shadowy form with blazing eyes had burst in upon them. Both tiny parents were clutched simultaneously and squeezed to death before they had time to realise what doom had overtaken them. They were promptly gulped down, in quick succession; and then, sitting erect and solemn close beside the nest, the grim marauder proceeded to pick the half-naked nestlings from the nest one by one, and to swallow them with deliberation. Though so small, they were the tastiest morsels he had sampled for a long time—since the nestful of partridge eggs, just beginning to hatch, which he had ravaged some weeks earlier in the season.

Up to this point, knowing that his greedy family was well supplied, the great owl had had no thought but for his own feasting. Now, however, he felt it was time

to hunt for bigger game—for something substantial to carry home to the nest. He winged swiftly across to the farmstead, where the barn and house and wood-shed stood black against the low moon. No living thing was astir in the farmyard, except a big white cat, prowling for mice along the edge of the barn. Though she was dangerous game, he swooped at her without a moment's hesitation. But the cat had seen him just in time and, with an indignant spitting, she whisked in under the barn. He snapped his beak angrily, made a tour of the buildings, and found the window of the chicken-house. But it was closed with wire-netting. Glaring in through the wide meshes, he saw the hens all asleep on their perches, some with half-grown chickens beside them. But the vigilant red cock was awake, and, eyeing him defiantly, gave utterance to a sharp *kut-ee-ee-ee* of warning. The marauder tore savagely at the meshes with his mighty talons, but the wire was too strong for him, and in an instant the place was in an uproar of frightened squawks and cacklings. The kitchen door flew open with a bang. A stream of yellow lamp-light flooded across the shadowy yard. The farmer ran out, shouting and swearing fluently, and the would-be assassin, furious at being barred from such a luxury of slaughter, flew off to seek some less well-guarded prey.

About a quarter of a mile farther down the valley lay another little backwoods farm, whose owner, when clearing the land, had had the good taste to leave several fine elms standing beside the house and barns. The valley was by this time full-flooded with moonlight, and the great owl, to avoid observation, flew low beside the

willow and alder bushes which fringed the brook. Across the open meadow that divided the barns from the brook he skimmed, almost brushing the grass-tops, then rose noiselessly into the deep shadows which clung among the branches of the thick-leaved elms. And here, as his luck would have it, he found two turkey-hens roosting upon one of the topmost boughs.

The turkeys, being light sleepers, detected him at once; but all they did was to stretch out their long necks inquiringly and cry *Kwit-kwit, kwit-kwit*. They were acquainted with the harmless little mouse-hunting barn-owl, but this great bird was something they had never seen before, and they were full of curiosity. In one moment he had risen above them. In the next he had fallen upon the nearest, clutched her by the neck, and choked her foolish noise. Beating her wings convulsively, she toppled off her perch. Her captor strove to bear her up and fly off with her, but she was too heavy a burden for him, and with a mighty flapping the two came slowly to the ground.

This was not exactly what the marauder wanted, but he was not one to lose any opportunity of destruction. He bit and tore with that deadly sickle of his beak till he had decapitated his massive prize, and, though he was by no means hungry, he broke up and swallowed most of the head, for the sake of the brains. In the meantime the other turkey, still resting on her perch, had kept on uttering her foolish *Kwit-kwit, kwit-kwit*, as if begging to know what all the excitement meant. She all too soon found out. Glancing up from his sanguinary meal, as if angered by her stupid noise, the

great owl fixed her for a second or two with his glassy stare. Then he shot up through the gloom till he was a few feet above the anxious chatterer, pounced upon her vindictively, and swept her, strangled and futilely fluttering, from her perch. Her life promptly went out through her gaping beak; but she, too, proved too heavy for her destroyer's wing-power, and, despite his determined flapping, he was borne slowly to the ground. He tore off her silly head in sheer wantonness of destruction, then, wiping his beak on her still quivering body, he bounced into the air and flew away to seek other quarry, sailing close to the ground to avoid making himself conspicuous, and glaring fiercely under every bush as he passed.

It chanced that an indiscreet hen, impatient of the safe nests in the barn and fowl-house, where, in return for security, her precious eggs were always taken from her, had found a secret spot under a clump of lilacs at the back of the garden. Here she had accumulated a clutch of eggs, which she had now been happily brooding for close upon the allotted three weeks. The chicks within were stirring and just beginning to tap with tiny bills at the walls of their shell prisons. The proud mother was answering these taps with low, crooning sounds of encouragement and content.

It was those soft utterances of mother-love that betrayed her to her doom. She saw a pair of wide, dreadful eyes glaring in upon her through the leafage. With a shrill screech of defiance, she ruffled up all her feathers, threw back her head, and faced the enemy with threatening, wide-open beak. But of scant avail

was all her devoted courage against such a foe as this. In a moment she was gripped by irresistible talons, jerked, valiantly battling, from her nest, strangled, and tossed aside, a heap of feebly-kicking feathers. And the slaughterer fell to gorging himself with the just-hatching eggs. Full-fed though he was, such supreme delicacies as those could not be left behind, and he managed somehow to put away the whole nestful. Then he grasped the body of the mother in his claws, hopped awkwardly out of the bushes with it, bore it somewhat heavily into the air, and headed his flight direct for the hollow tree in the woods.

He flew high now, having no care to conceal his coming, and the backwoods world of forest and scattered farms, rough, stump-strewn pastures, and raw, new clearings, with the silver coils of the slow brook brightly threading them, lay outspread sharp-edged below him in the white flood of the moonlight. The robber flew more slowly than was his wont, his limp booty being a massive-bodied Brahma of some six or seven pounds dead weight, and he himself somewhat sluggish from his over-hearty feast. But there was no need of haste; so he did not exert himself, but winnowed on through the blue-silver night, well satisfied with his list of slain.

Suddenly from far over the tree-tops came a hollow call. *Whuh-whoo, whuh-whuh, whuh-whuh*—not long-drawn, but staccato, hurried, urgent. It was his mate's voice, summoning him, crying for help. He woke instantly from his lethargy, dropped his booty, answered with one sonorous *whoo-oo-oo*, and shot home-

ward with the utmost speed of which his strenuous wings were capable.

During his absence that prowling lynx which had caused him apprehension an hour before had crept back, on the trail of a rabbit, to the neighbourhood of the hollow tree. She had missed the rabbit, but happening to glance upwards, with cruel eyes as round and moonlike as those of the great owl himself, she had detected the big black hole in the age-whitened trunk. Such a hole, she knew well enough, would be sure to be occupied by something—most probably by something young, and defenceless, and good to eat. She was hungry, and, moreover, she had a pair of sturdy kittens to feed at home in her own well-hidden lair. She ran nimbly up the huge gnarled trunk to investigate.

At the first rattling sound of her claws upon the bark, the mother-owl, who had been snuggling her owlets, shot forth angrily from the hole to see what creature was so bold as to invade her realm. But at the sight of the lynx—a gigantic tuft-eared cat as big as a foxhound—her wrath changed to frantic terror for her young, who were not yet sufficiently fledged for effective flight. Though even more bloodthirsty and wastefully murderous than her mate, her courage was of the finest, and she knew no such thing as shirking where the defence of her round-eyed nestlings was concerned. With that one sharp cry for help—which her homing mate had heard—she swooped from her branch and struck the lynx heavily in the face with wing and claw.

Taken by surprise, the lynx was almost jolted from

her hold. With a harsh spitting, she cowered and shielded her face between her paws, while the frantic mother raked her back savagely. Then, furious at being so handled by an adversary whom she despised, she scrambled on upwards and gained the branch beside the nest. From this vantage she struck out like lightning with her great armed paw, just as the desperate mother was swooping upon her again. Had the blow got fairly home, it would have been final; but the agile bird swerved backwards in time, and it struck her but glancingly, with its force spent, on the breast. Her dense elastic armour of feathers saved her, but a shower of feathers flew, and she was hurled half-way to the ground before she could recover herself from the shock.

Imagining that her adversary was disposed of, the lynx thrust her head into the hole. The hardy owlets bit and clawed her face valiantly, but she snatched one in her jaws, crunched its neck, and plucked it forth upon the branch. Holding it comfortably between her huge fore-paws, she lay flat along the branch and proceeded to devour it. As she did so, the desperate mother, shaken but undaunted, returned to the attack and struck her again in the face with rending talons.

Holding her prey firmly with one paw, the lynx, with an ear-splitting yowl of pain and rage, lashed out again at her resolute assailant, but missed her aim completely. And at this juncture the male bird arrived.

In silence he shot downward and struck at the great grey beast. The latter had caught sight of him as he swooped. She let go of the dead owlet—which dropped

to the ground—and rose slightly on her hind-quarters in order to meet this new attack with the full armoury of her fore-claws. By a fortunate stroke she caught him by one wing, and the next moment her long fangs were buried in his thigh. Held thus at close quarters, he pounded madly with his wings, and tore in a frenzy at his enemy's face with his beak and his free talons. He was pulled down, however, and borne backwards, for all his indomitable struggles, and, getting her claws set into one wing near the shoulder, the lynx fairly tore it from its socket. But undaunted even in that hopeless strait, he went on fighting to the death.

The mother-owl, meanwhile, had been tearing and clawing like a maniac at the lynx's neck from above. Unable any longer to endure this torment, the latter tried to double back upon the narrow branch and defend herself. The male bird heaved up valiantly beneath, and with a last effort fixed his beak into the side of her throat. She lost her balance, and the two toppled off into space together. Over and over they turned, close locked, and then fell apart. The owl, all but dead and with one wing hanging useless from its tendons, continued to roll over in his descent, and landed with a thud which finished him. The lynx, on the other hand, turning herself right side up and spreading all four legs apart so as to make a sort of parachute of herself, landed lightly on the powerful elastic springs of her paws. The mother-owl had been on top of her all the way down, and was still frantically tearing at her back. But the lynx had had enough. With a screech of panic, she darted under some low branches, scraping off her

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assailant, and sped away, belly to earth, like a terrified cat, through the densest thickets she could find.

The victorious mother-owl did not follow. She circled twice, very slowly, above the sprawled bodies of her mate and her nestling, staring down upon them with wide, unwinking expressionless eyes. Then she winnowed soundlessly up to her perch, and hurried into the nest to see if her other fledgling had escaped unharmed.





THE icy rain of a belated Northern spring drove down steadily through the dark branches of the fir-thicket, and the litter of young "snow-shoe" rabbits, shivering beneath the insufficient shelter, huddled themselves together, for warmth, into a reddish-brown ball of the same colour as the dead fir-needles which formed their bed. Their long-eared mother, after nursing them all through the harsh daylight and shielding them as best she could with her furry body, had slipped away to forage for her evening meal under cover of the gathering dusk, leaving her litter, perforce, to the chances of the wild.

Concealment being their only defence against their many prowling and hungry foes, the compact cluster of long-eared babies made no tiniest whimper of protest against their discomfort, lest the sound should betray them to some hunting fox or weasel. Had they kept still, as they should have done, they would have been invisible to the keenest passing eye; but just for the moment the cluster was convulsed by a silent struggle. One of the litter, chancing to have been left on the outer surface of the bunch, came to the conclusion that he would be more comfortable at the centre, and set himself to force his way in. Being the biggest and strongest of the litter, he presently succeeded, in spite

of the resistance of his weaker brothers and sisters. And so, since he was the one least in need of warmth, he managed to get the most of it. For it is written in the Law of the Wilderness that to him that hath shall be given.

Fortunately for the defenceless litter, no hungry prowler came by during the commotion, and the struggle was soon over. The ousted ones resigned themselves to the inevitable, and settled themselves quietly on the cold exterior of the bunch. Some fifteen or twenty minutes later the mother returned, well stuffed with sprouting grasses and the aromatic leaf-buds of the birch saplings. Through the gathering dark and the rain she came hopping in soundlessly on her broad furry pads. She slipped under the low-hanging branches of the thicket, curled herself about the shivering cluster of her little ones, and drew them close against her warm, wet body, where at once they fell to nursing greedily.

Soon the whole litter was sound asleep, so well warmed by their mother's abundant milk that the bitter rain lashing down upon them through the branches disturbed them not at all. The night was black and full of strange, subdued noises, the swish of sudden rain-gusts, the occasional scraping of great branches against each other, and always, high overhead, the sea-like rush and muffled roar of the wind in the straining tops of the firs and hemlocks. While the little ones slept soundly, careless of the storm and unconscious of all danger, the mother's sleep was hardly sleep at all. While her eyes closed drowsily in the darkness, some portion of her senses was always on the alert, always

standing sentry, ready to arouse her to instant and complete wakefulness. Her ears, attuned to catch the faintest doubtful sound, were never asleep, never quite at rest; her sensitive nostrils were always quiveringly attentive. If a twig snapped and was blown to earth, her eyes opened wide at once, and both ears stood up in anxious interrogation. Once through the hushed tumult those vigilant ears caught the sound of light feet stealing past the edge of the thicket. Instantly they stiffened to a rigid stillness, as if frozen. But the menacing sound—so faint that few ears save hers could have detected it—passed on. The rigid ears relaxed; the round, bulging anxious eyes of the furry mother closed again.

That night of rain and cold few of the hungry hunting beasts were on the prowl, and no further peril came near the shelterless family in the fir-thicket. But had a fox or a weasel chanced upon them, the timorous mother would have been no protection to her young. With no defence against her swarming foes except her obscure colouring and her speed in flight, she would have had to choose between staying to die with the helpless litter or leaving them to their fate and escaping, if she could, to bear another litter in their place. And there is no doubt as to which course she would have chosen. She loved her young ones, but she loved life better. She had but one life, and she had had many young. She would have run away, careering with mighty bounds through the stormy darkness to hide at last, with pounding heart and panting lungs, in some other and safer thicket.

And the nurslings would have made a succulent meal for the lucky prowler.

Fortunately, however, for this little story, the timorous mother was not to be faced by any such harsh alternative. For in this particular litter of hers, as we have seen, there was one youngster so much stronger than his fellows as to have been singled out, apparently, for the special favour of the Unseen Powers of the Wilderness. To him fell more than his due share of the family warmth, the family nourishment, to the end that he should grow up a peculiarly fine and vigorous specimen of his race. Hence it came about that, though death in many furred and feathered forms prowled about them or hovered over them by night and by day, this particular mother and her young escaped discovery. No dreadful peering eyes chanced to penetrate their screen of drooping fir-branches, and the mother, on her perilous foragings in the twilight or the rose-grey dawn, was never pounced upon or trailed. For that one sturdy youngling's sake, it would seem, the Spirits of the Wild had decreed it so.

Presently the harsh season relented. The rain ceased, except for an occasional warm, vitalising shower; the wilderness was steeped in caressing sunshine; the leaf-buds of the birch and poplar burst into a flood of tenderest green; and in every open glade the painted trillium unfolded its fairy blooms of white and carmine. Spring, in haste to make up for lost time, rushed forward glowing to meet the summer. The litter of young "snow-shoes" had been, for a week or more, browsing on the tender herbage on the skirts of the thicket, and depend-

ing daily less and less upon their mother's milk for their subsistence. Suddenly, on one of those rich days, warm yet tonic, when life runs sweetly in the veins of all the wilderness, the hitherto devoted mother looked coldly on her young and refused them her breasts. Her biggest and most favoured son, unused to rebuffs, persisted obstinately. She fetched him a kick from her powerful hinder paws which sent him rolling over and over on the brown carpet of fir-needles. Then she turned about and went hopping off through the bushes to seek other interests and make ready to rear another family. The kicked one, recovering from his astonishment, scratched the needles from his ears with his hind paws, stared indignantly at his brothers and sisters, as if he thought that they had done it, and hopped away in the opposite direction to that which his unsympathetic mother had taken. He browsed upon the young grasses till his appetite was satisfied, then took cover beneath a thick, low juniper bush, and settled himself to sleep, his independent spirit refusing to be daunted by the unaccustomed loneliness. The rest of the litter, less venturesome, peered forth timorously from the edges of their shelter, nibbled the herbage that was within easy reach, and finally huddled down together, for comfort, on the old nest. That same night, while they slept in a furry bunch, a weasel came that way and took it into his triangular head to explore the thicket. He was not hungry, but, after the manner of his bloodthirsty tribe, he loved killing for its own sake—which most of the other hunting-folk of the wilderness do not. He savagely dispatched the whole litter, drank the blood

of a couple, devoured the brains of another, tossed the mangled carcasses wantonly about, and left them to the next prowler that might come by. A few minutes later a big "fisher" arrived, maliciously pursuing the weasel's trail, and did not disdain the easy repast that had been left for him.

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During the sunlit, spring-scented weeks that followed, while the young snow-shoe rabbit was growing swiftly to maturity, the favour of the Fates continued to shield him. If a prowling fox chanced to peer, sniffing hungrily, beneath the bush which formed his bivouac—for he knew no home, no specially preferred abiding-place—it always happened that some caprice, perhaps some dim premonition of peril, would arouse him from his half-slumber and send him off noiselessly through the shadows a few moments before the arrival of the foe, who would be left to smell angrily at the still warm couch. If, as he hopped buoyantly across some moon-lit glade, the terrible horned owl, that scourge of the wilderness night, dropped down at him on soundless wings, it always happened that some great branch would magically interpose itself just in time, and the clutching talons would be diverted from their aim. Such experiences—and they were many—served only to sharpen his vigilance and drive home upon his narrow brain the lesson, more vital to a snow-shoe rabbit than all others put together, that destruction lay in wait for him every hour.

Thus well schooled by that rough but most efficient

teacher, the wilderness, and well nourished by the abundance of the growing season, young Snow-Shoe came swiftly to his full stature. Though universally called a rabbit, and, more definitely, a "snow-shoe" rabbit, by reason of his great, spreading, furry feet, he was in reality a true hare, larger than the rabbits, much longer and more powerful in the hind legs, incomparably swifter in flight, but quite incapable of making himself a home by burrowing in the earth. He was of the tribe of the homeless ones, who know no shelter but the overhanging branches of bush or thicket, no snug lair in which to hide from storm or cold, no nest save such dead leafage as they may find to crouch upon. In colour he was of a rusty reddish-brown above and pure white underneath, and he had the long, alert ears, narrow skull, and protruding, guileless eyes of all the hare family.

And now the Unseen Powers, taking stock of their favourite, perceived that he was bigger, stronger, fleetier, and more alert in all his senses than any other buck snow-shoe in the whole wide basin of the Ottanoosis stream. Thereupon they decided to leave him to his own resources. And straightway life grew even more eventful for him than it had been hitherto.

It was high summer in the Ottanoosis Valley. The air, hot but wholesome, and sweet with faint wild smells of moss and balsam-fir and juniper, breathed softly through the dense, dark patches of evergreens, and rustled lightly among the birches and poplars which clothed the tumbled rocky ridges. The river, shrunken in its channel, here brawled musically over its shallow

rapids, there widened out into still reaches where the great black moose would wade belly-deep in the heat as they fed upon the roots of the water-lilies. Here and there a tract of dark cedar swamps gave shelter to the bears. The valley, an epitome of the wilderness, was the congenial home of foxes, lynxes, fishers, minks, weasels, skunks, and porcupines; and every single one of these, the blameless vegetarian porcupine excepted, was a tireless and implacable hunter of the snow-shoe rabbits. Moreover, in the deeper recesses of the fir and hemlock woods several pairs of the murderous giant horned owls had their retreats; and in the high ravines of the hills that rimmed the valley were the nests of the white-headed eagles and of the great blue goshawks, those swiftest and most relentless of all the marauders of the air, who also looked upon the long-eared tribe as their most natural prey and easiest quarry. It would seem that, in the game of life as played in the Ottanonsis Valley, the dice were heavily loaded against the Homeless One.

It was a sultry drowsy afternoon, and the Homeless One, crouched beneath a thick juniper bush, was more nearly asleep than was at all usual with him. Indeed, it was the safest time of day, when most of the hunting beasts were apt to be curled up in their lairs, when the giant owl slumbered in the depths of the hemlock glooms, when few enemies were abroad except the soaring eagles and the long-winged tireless goshawks. But it is the exceptions rather than the rules which make the life of the wilderness exciting. Just as young Snow-Shoe, who had browsed comfortably, was in his

deepest drowse, his quivering nostrils, which never slept, signalled to his brain—"DEATH." In that same lightning fraction of a second all his powers were wide awake, and, resting as he did in the position of a coiled spring, he shot into the air through the thin fringes of his shelter just as the slender yellow shape of a hungry weasel alighted on the spot where he had been lying. His great furry hind-paws, as they left the ground, just brushed the weasel's pointed nose.

The weasel's jaws opened in a snarl of savage disappointment. Never before, in all his sanguinary experience of snow-shoe rabbits, had he missed what seemed to him so sure and easy a kill. But it was not in the weasel nature to be discouraged, as one of the cat tribe might have been, by the failure of his first spring. Though his intended victim was already many feet away, lengthening out in great bounds which propelled him through the bushes at an amazing pace, the weasel darted after him confidently, trusting to his endurance and tenacity of purpose to win in the end against his quarry's greater speed. In a few seconds the fugitive was lost to sight among the leafage, but the relentless pursuer followed the trail by scent for several hundred yards. Then, because he knew it was the habit of the snow-shoe tribe to circle back so as to regain the familiar feeding-grounds and coverts, this craftiest of hunters left the trail and cut a chord to the circle, expecting to intercept his quarry's flight. Had he been dealing with an ordinary, average snow-shoe, things would have fallen out something after this fashion. He would have shown himself suddenly right in the fugitive's

path and jumped at him with a terrifying snarl. The fugitive, panic-stricken to find himself thus confronted by the foe whom he had thought left far behind, would have cowered down trembling in his tracks and yielded up his life with a scream of anguish.

But in this case the weasel found his calculations all astray. This quarry's flight was so unexpectedly swift that the pursuer reached the point of interception too late to lie in ambush. He arrived just as young Snow-Shoe came by with a wild rush. He sprang, of course, but from too great a distance for his spring to be effective. Snow-Shoe, catching sight of him just in time, was not panic-stricken, but, without swerving from his course, went clean over him in one tremendous bound, and at the same time, as luck would have it, fetched him a convulsive kick on the side of the head with one powerful hind paw as he passed. The weasel went sprawling, with a startled squeak, and the fugitive, tearing on, had vanished before he could recover himself. Refusing to be discouraged, however, and blazing with fury at his discomfiture, he settled himself down again doggedly to the pursuit. He had now a more just appreciation of his quarry's pace and powers, so he drew a longer chord to the circle, determined that this time he would get well ahead and make certain of his prey.

But, unfortunately for his enemy's designs, the Homeless One was no slave to the traditions of his tribe. He was now thoroughly frightened. He changed his mind about running in a circle. He lost all desire to get back to his familiar haunts. Untiring and swift he kept

straight on, and the weasel, after waiting in vain for many minutes at the point where, by all the rules of rabbit-hunting, the prey should have been intercepted and pulled down, gave up the chase in disgust and fell furiously to hunting wood-mice. But his brain retained a vindictive memory of the great snow-shoe who had so outwitted him.

The Homeless One, meanwhile, had reached a part of the valley which wore a novel air to him. This section had been chopped over by the lumbermen some seven or eight years before, and cleared of nearly all the heavy timber. There were few trees of any size, and most of the ground was covered with dense thickets of birch, poplar, Indian pear, wild cherry, and mountain-ash, with here and there a patch of young balsam-firs, darkly but richly green, and giving forth an aromatic perfume in the heat. All the thickets were traversed by the runways of the snow-shoe rabbits—narrow, well-trodden trails frequented by all the tribe.

The Homeless One by this time had got over his fright. Having a conveniently short memory, he had forgotten why he was frightened, and also—which was altogether unusual—he had forgotten the haunts of his past life, a mile or so away. A sleek young doe met him in the runway, and waved long ears of admiration at his comely stature and length of limb. He stopped to touch noses with her. Coyly she hopped away, leading him into a cool, green-shadowed covert of sumach scrub.

The Homeless One was well contented with his new feeding-grounds. The strange does all received him with frank approval. He found the bucks, to be sure, by

no means so friendly, but this was of small concern to him. If any of them tried to drive him away, he bowled them over with a careless rush, or treated them to a scornful kick of such vigour as to bring them promptly to their manners. Being a philosophic folk, they accepted his society forthwith, and forgot that he was a stranger and an interloper.

As was the custom of the snow-shoe tribe, the Homeless One was in the habit of passing most of the hours of full daylight crouched in a half-doze in some dim covert. When hungry, or in the mood for diversion, he would slip forth, after assuring himself that there was no danger in the air, and either go leaping along the runways in playful pursuit of his acquaintances, or fall to browsing on the wild grasses and tender herbage.

One afternoon, as he was hopping lazily after a pair of does, he was amazed and startled by the sight of a big goshawk shuffling at an awkward gait along the runway behind him. The runway was narrow and densely overarched by low branches, so it was impossible that the great hawk could have seen him from the upper air. Obviously the enterprising bird had entered the runway at its outlet on a little glade some forty or fifty yards back, and here he was now foolishly undertaking to hunt the fleet snow-shoes on their own domain.

The first impulse of the Homeless One, naturally, was flight. He knew that terrible long-winged hawk, swiftest and most valiant of all the marauders of the air. With one bound he cleared the two does and raced on for a score of yards. Then curiosity overcame his fear. He stopped short and turned to stare at his pursuer, and

the frightened does, blundering against him as they fled past, nearly knocked him over.

Paying no attention to the does, he sat up on his hind-quarters, ears erect and eyes bulging, and watched the hawk's approach with mingled wonder and contempt. The beautiful, fierce-eyed bird was not at home upon the level earth. His deadly talons were not made for walking, but for perching and for slaying. His realm was the free spaces of the air, and here in the runway he could not spread his wings. His progress was so slow, laborious, and clumsy that, but for the glare of his level, piercing eyes, he would have seemed grotesque. The Homeless One, deeply puzzled, kept hopping away along the runway as the clumsy bird approached, preserving a safe distance of ten or a dozen yards, and ready to make an instantaneous dart into the underbrush on either side if the enemy should show the slightest sign of rising into the air. The two does, meanwhile, reassured by their companion's boldness, had ventured back to peer at the strange intruder from farther up the runway.

Apparently undiscouraged by his failure to overtake the mocking fugitives, the great hawk shuffled on steadily, the three rabbits giving way rather contemptuously and at their leisure before him. This went on for a distance of perhaps a hundred yards, till the runway came to an end in a patch of grassy open. As the foremost of the two does hopped forth into the sunlight, there came a rush of wings overhead, and a bright form, swooping from just above the green birch-tops, struck her down. Her scream of terror was strangled

in her throat as the talons of a second hawk, larger and more powerful than the first, clutched her life out in an instant. The other doe and the Homeless One, horrified out of their complacence, shot off in opposite directions through the densest of the underbrush. And the victor, standing erect and trim, with one foot upon her still quivering prey, stared about her with hard, bright eyes like jewels, waiting for her mate, who had so cleverly driven the runaway for her, to emerge from the shadows and join her in the feast.

After this adventure the Homeless One, who was gifted beyond his fellows with the power of learning from experience, was always a little suspicious of the tribal runways. He used them, for his convenience and for his amusement, as much as ever, but he had gained a dim notion of the advantages which they offered to his enemies. One evening, on the violet edge of dusk, when he was gambolling with another buck and several frisky does, a red fox came racing down the runway without making any attempt to disguise his approach. Swift as he was, the swifter snow-shoes easily outstripped him as they fled from his terrifying attack. From the other end of the runway they darted forth pell-mell, to be met by another fox, who, leaping among them and slashing from side to side with his long white fangs, brought down two of the panic-stricken fugitives before they could scatter across the open, while the original pursuer was able to seize a third in the momentary confusion. But the Homeless One was not there. At the first appearance of the red-furred enemy he had darted aside from the runway

and slipped off like a ghost through the gloom of the underbrush. He was not badly frightened, so he only ran a dozen yards or so. Then he stopped and complacently fell to browsing, quite careless as to the fate of his companions. A snow-shoe rabbit has enough to think of in guarding his own skin, and it had never occurred to him to try and warn his fellows of the trap they were running into.

It was through such experiences, such hairbreadth adventures and escapes, that the Homeless One, always in hourly peril of his life, but not without distractions and joys of his own to make that life sweet to him, saw the hot, bright summer pass into the crisp, exhilarating autumn, with its glories of scarlet on the maple-leaves, dull crimson on the sumachs, aerial gold on the birches and poplars, and vivid, waxy vermilion on the heavy fruit-clusters of the mountain-ash trees overhanging the amber eddies of the Ottanoonsis stream. The patches of barren, clothed only with a bushy scrub not more than a foot and a half in height, were tinged to a rich cobalt by the crowded masses of the blueberries. These luscious berries gave the snow-shoes a pleasant variation to their diet, and the matted scrub was traversed abundantly by their runways. The black bears of the Ottanoonsis, also, would come to these blueberry patches and squat upon their plump haunches to feast greedily on the juicy harvest. The Homeless One, rejoicing in his swiftness of foot, regarded these huge, black, cunning-eyed beasts with scorn, because they were so slow and lumbering in their movements. One day he saw a bear apparently asleep, its rusty-black snout all purple-streaked

with the juices of the berries it had been devouring. Yes, it was clear the bear was sleeping soundly, well stuffed with food and well content with the warm sun. The Homeless One had never before enjoyed such a chance to examine a bear at close quarters. It almost looked to him as if that bear was dead. A shrewd blue-jay in a neighbouring bush shrieked a note of warning. It was ignored. The Homeless One hopped closer and closer, investigating the monster with eyes and nose alike intensely interested. All at once a huge black paw, armed with mighty claws, swept down upon him with the speed of a trained boxer's fist. But the Homeless One was no such fool as the blue-jay had taken him to be. When that murderous paw descended, he was no longer just there, but some seven or eight feet away and waving his long ears innocently. The bear, trying to look unconcerned, fell to munching blueberries again, and the Homeless One hopped off with his curiosity quite satisfied.

It was not until November came, with its biting sleet showers, its snows that fell, rested a few days, and vanished, its spells of sharp frost and sudden bone-searching cold, that the Homeless One began really to suffer the penalties of his inherited incapacity to make or find himself a home. The comfortable leafage had fallen from all the trees and bushes except the evergreens—the firs and pines, hemlocks and cedars. It was dreary work to crouch beneath a dripping bush while the icy winds scourged the high valley of the Ottanoonsis. Nevertheless, he kept heart to play with his furry companions, and life grew more eventful day

by day as his enemies grew more and more hungry and persistent in their hunting. It was about this time, when the snow began to linger upon the ground in glaring patches, that his coat began to change in colour in order to make him less conspicuous. He was moulting his rusty-coloured summer fur, and the new fur, as it came in, was pure white. By the time the snow had come to stay the winter his clean, new snowy coat was in readiness to match it, so that when he crouched motionless, his ears laid back and his nose between his paws, the keenest and hungriest of eyes would usually fail to distinguish him.

One windless, biting afternoon about sunset, when the shadows were stretching long and blue across the snow, the Homeless One was just stirring from his chilly couch to go and feed, when from behind his sheltering bush a lean weasel darted upon him. Thanks to his amazing alertness—and his luck—he shot aside in time. But just in time. It was the narrowest shave he had ever had, and he left a tantalising mouthful of fur in the weasel's jaws.

As it happened, this was the same big weasel, swift and cunning, whom he had baulked so ignominiously in the early part of the summer; and by some freak of chance the incident—and possibly some peculiarity in the scent of this huge snow-shoe—now revived in the weasel's memory, and he took up the pursuit with a special fury. The snow lay thin and hard, so that the Homeless One was deprived of the advantage which his wide, furry feet would have given him had the snow been soft and deep. To make matters worse, he was

feeling slack and tired that day, and so fell short of his accustomed speed. As was his rule when pursued, he neither followed the runways nor fled in a circle, but raced straight off through the thickets, dodging erratically and traversing whatever obstacles he thought most likely to embarrass his pursuer. But to his horror he found that pursuer still close upon his heels. The shock of this discovery almost brought upon him that fatal panic which so often overtakes a hunted rabbit and makes him yield himself suddenly as an easy prey. But the Homeless One was of sterner stuff, and that moment's panic only stung him to fiercer effort.

Nevertheless—for the weasel's endurance was greater than his—the Homeless One's career would have come to an end in this last, desperate adventure but for the fact that the Unseen Powers once more woke up and took a whimsical hand in the affair. Just as he was darting, stretched out to his limit, beneath the shelter of a snowy bush, a great owl swooped and made a clutch at him. But the owl had miscalculated the speed which the Homeless One was displaying. She missed him, and she was just in time to seize his pursuer instead. Infuriated at this disappointment—for she would have greatly preferred tender rabbit to tough weasel—her talons closed like steel jaws upon the weasel's neck and loins. Rising noiselessly into the air, she swept away into the shadows with her writhing victim. And the Homeless One, presently realising that he was no longer pursued, hid himself in the deepest thicket he could find, with his heart nearly bursting between his ribs.

When winter had finally closed down upon the

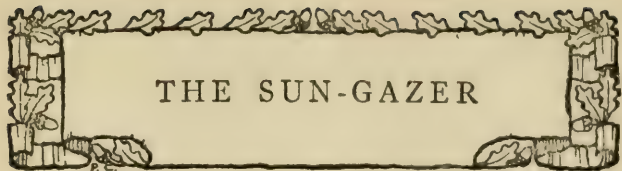
Ottanoonsis Valley, with snow four and five feet deep on the levels, and a cold that made the trees snap like gunshots in the stillness, the Homeless One, though with no snug lair to hide in, was in reality less uncomfortable than he had been in the variable weather. The cold, though so intense, was of a sparkling dryness, and every snow-covered bush was ready to afford him a secluded shelter. For him and his tribe—more fortunate in this hard season than their enemies—food was fairly abundant, for the depth of the snow enabled them to reach the tender twigs of the birches and willows and poplars. Moreover, alone among the kindreds of the wild, these weak, defenceless, homeless tribes of the snow-shoes managed to find heart for gaiety and play amid the white desolation. When the full moon flooded the wastes with her sinister, icy-blue light, the snow-shoes would hop forth from their coverts and gather in the open glades. There they would amuse themselves for hours with a strange game, leaping over each other, and chasing each other till their tracks made curious patterns on the snow almost as if they were performing some wild quadrille. But during these gaities they were never unmindful of their caution. They could not afford to be, in that world of prowling death. At every entrance to the glade there would be stationed a sentinel, erect upon his hindquarters, long ears waving warily, every sense at utmost tension, ready to give the alarm by a loud pounding with his hind feet at the faintest sign of peril.

It was during one such moonlight revel that the Homeless One stood sentry at the post of chief danger

—where a dense growth of hemlocks overhung the edge of the glade. He had been some time on duty, and was just about to give up his post to one of the revellers, who was even then hopping over to relieve him, when he caught sound of a stealthy movement close behind the screen of branches. He gave three frantic thumps with his powerful hind foot, and the revellers vanished as if wiped out by a giant breath. In the next instant he leapt for his life, desperately.

But he was too late—by just the moment it had taken him to give the warning signal. Even as he sprang, a shape of shadowy grey, like a huge cat with pale moon eyes and tufted ears, launching itself through the branches, fell upon him and bore him down, and long fangs reached his throat. With a snarl of triumph, the famished lynx tore at the warm prey between his paws, while a dark stain spread upon the snow. The Homeless One, as truly as many a hero of history and song, had died for the safety of his tribe.





I

To Jim Horner it seemed as if the great, white-headed eagle was in some way the uttered word of the mountain and the lake—of the lofty, solitary, granite-crested peak, and of the deep, solitary water at its base. As his canoe raced down the last mad rapid, and seemed to snatch breath again as it floated out upon the still water of the lake, Jim would rest his paddle across the gunwales and look upward expectantly. First his keen, far-sighted, grey eyes would sweep the blue arc of sky, in search of the slow circling of wide, motionless wings. Then, if the blue was empty of this far shape, his glance would range at once to a dead pine standing sole on a naked and splintered shoulder of the mountain, which he knew as "Old Baldy." There he was almost sure to see the great bird sitting, motionless and majestic, staring at the sun. Floating idly and smoking, resting after his long battle with the rapids, he would watch, till the immensity and the solitude would creep in upon his spirit and oppress him. Then, at last, a shrill yelp, far-off and faint, but sinister, would come from the pine-top; and the eagle, launching himself on open wings from his perch, would either wheel upward into the blue, or flap away over the serried fir-tops to some ravine in the cliffs that hid his nest.

One day, when Jim came down the river and stopped, as usual, to look for the great bird, he scanned in vain both sky and cliff-side. At last he gave up the search and paddled on down the lake with a sense of loss. Something had vanished from the splendour of the solitude. But presently he heard, close overhead, the beat and whistle of vast wings, and looking up, he saw the eagle passing above him, flying so low that he could catch the hard, unwinking, tameless stare of its black and golden eyes as they looked down upon him with a sort of inscrutable challenge. He noted also a peculiarity which he had never seen in any other eagle. This one had a streak of almost black feathers immediately over its left eye, giving it a heavy and sinister eyebrow. The bird carried in the clutch of its talons a big, glistening lake trout, probably snatched from the fish-hawk; and Jim was able to take note of the very set of its pinion-feathers as the wind hummed in their tense webs. Flying with a massive power quite unlike the ease of his soaring, the eagle mounted gradually up the steep, passed the rocky shoulder with its watch-tower pine, and disappeared over the edge of a ledge which looked to Horner like a mere scratch across the face of the mountain.

"There's where his nest is, sure!" muttered Horner to himself. And remembering that cold challenge in the bird's yellow stare, he suddenly decided that he wanted to see an eagle's nest. He had plenty of time. He was in no particular hurry to get back to the settlement and the gossip of the cross-roads store. He turned his canoe to land, lifted her out and hid her

in the bushes, and struck back straight for the face of "Old Baldy."

The lower slope was difficult to climb, a tangle of tumbled boulders and fallen trunks, mantled in the soundless gloom of the fir-forest. Skilled woodsman though he was, Horner's progress was so slow, and the windless heat became so oppressive to his impatience, that he was beginning to think of giving up the idle venture, when suddenly he came face to face with a perpendicular and impassable wall of cliff. This curt arrest to his progress was just what was needed to stiffen his wavering resolution. He understood the defiance which his ready fancy had found in the stare of the eagle. Well, he had accepted the challenge. He would not be baffled by a rock. If he could not climb over it, he would go round it; but he would find the nest.

With an obstinate look in his eyes, Horner began to work his way along the foot of the cliff towards the right. Taking advantage of every inch of ascent that he could gain, he at last found, to his satisfaction, that he had made sufficient height to clear the gloom of the woods. As he looked out over their tops, a light breeze cooled his wet forehead, and he pressed on with fresh vigour. Presently the slope grew a trifle easier, the foothold surer, and he mounted more rapidly. The steely lake and the rough-ridged, black-green sea of the fir-tops began to unroll below him. At last he rounded an elbow of the steep, and there before him, upthrust perhaps a hundred feet above his head, stood the outlying shoulder of rock, crowned with its dead

pine, on which he was accustomed to see the eagle sitting. Even as he looked, motionless, there came a rushing of great wings; and suddenly there was the eagle himself, erect on his high perch, and staring, as it seemed to Horner, straight into the sun.

When Horner resumed his climbing, the great bird turned his head and gazed down upon him with an ironic fixity which betrayed neither dread nor wonder. Concluding that the nest would be lying somewhere within view of its owner's watch-tower, Horner now turned his efforts towards reaching the dead pine. With infinite difficulty, and with a few bruises to arm and leg, he managed to cross the jagged crevice which partly separated the jutting rock-pier from the main face of the cliff. Then, laboriously and doggedly, he dragged himself up the splintered slope, still being forced around to the right, till there fell away below him a gulf into which it was not good for the nervous to look. Feeling that a fate very different from that of Lot's wife might be his if he should let himself look back too indiscreetly, he kept his eyes upon the lofty goal and pressed on upwards with a haste that now grew a trifle feverish. It began to seem to him that the irony of the eagle's changeless stare might perhaps not be unjustified.

Not till Horner had conquered the steep and, panting but elated, gained the very foot of the pine, did the eagle stir. Then, spreading his wings with a slow disdain, as if not dread but aversion to this unbidden visitor bade him go, he launched himself on a long, splendid sweep over the gulf, and then mounted on a spacious spiral to his inaccessible outlook in the blue.

Leaning against the bleached and scarred trunk of the pine, Horner watched this majestic departure for some minutes, recovering his breath and drinking deep the cool and vibrant air. Then he turned and scanned the face of the mountain.

There it lay, in full view—the nest which he had climbed so far to find. It was not more than a hundred yards away. Yet, at first sight, it seemed hopelessly out of reach. The chasm separating the ledge on which it clung from the outlying rock of the pine was not more than twenty feet across; but its bottom was apparently somewhere in the roots of the mountain. There was no way of passing it at this point. But Horner had a faith that there was a way to be found over or around every obstacle in the world, if one kept on looking for it resolutely enough. To keep on looking for a path to the eagle's nest, he struggled forward, around the outer slope of the buttress, down a ragged incline, and across a narrow and dizzy "saddle-back," which brought him presently upon another angle of the steep, facing southeast. Clinging with his toes and one hand, while he wiped his dripping forehead with his sleeve, he looked up—and saw the whole height of the mountain, unbroken and daunting, stretched skyward above him.

But to Horner the solemn sight was not daunting in the least.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, grinning with satisfaction. "I *hev* circumvented that there crevice, sure's death!"

Of the world below he had now a view that was almost overpoweringly unrestricted; but of the mountain, and his scene of operations, he could see only the

stretch directly above him. A little calculation convinced him, however, that all he had to do was to keep straight on up for perhaps a hundred and fifty feet, then, as soon as the slope would permit, work around to his left, and descend upon the nest from above. Incidentally, he made up his mind that his return journey should be made by another face of the mountain—any other, rather than that by which he had rashly elected to come.

It seemed to Horner like a mile, that last hundred and fifty feet; but at last he calculated that he had gained enough in height. Making his way towards the left, he came upon a narrow ledge, along which he could move easily sidewise, by clinging to the rock. Presently it widened to a path by which he could walk almost at ease, with the wide, wild solitude, dark green laced with silver watercourses, spread like a stupendous amphitheatre far below him. It was the wilderness which he knew so well in detail, yet had never before seen as a whole; and the sight, for a few moments, held him in a kind of awed surprise. When, at last, he tore his gaze free from the majestic spectacle, there, some ten or twelve yards below his feet, he saw the object of his quest.

It was nothing much to boast of in the way of architecture, this nest of the Kings of the Air—a mere cart-load of sticks and bark and coarse grass, apparently tumbled at haphazard upon the narrow ledge. But in fact its foundations were so skilfully wedged into the crevices of the rock, its structure was so cunningly interwoven, that the fiercest winds which scourged

that lofty seat were powerless against it. It was a secure throne, no matter what tempests might rage around it.

Sitting half erect on the nest were two eaglets, almost full grown, and so nearly full feathered that Horner wondered why they did not take wing at his approach. He did not know that the period of helplessness with these younglings of royal birth lasted even after they looked as big and well able to take care of themselves as their parents. It was a surprise to him, also, to see that they were quite unlike their parents in colour, being black all over from head to tail, instead of a rich brown with snow-white head, neck, and tail. As he stared, he slowly realised that the mystery of the rare "black eagle" was explained. He had seen one once, flying heavily just above the tree-tops, and imagined it a discovery of his own. But now he reached the just conclusion, that it had been merely a youngster in its first plumage.

As he stared, the two young birds returned his gaze with interest, watching him with steady, yellow, undaunted eyes, from under their flat, fierce brows; with high-shouldered wings half raised, they appeared quite ready to resent any familiarity which the strange intruder might be contemplating.

Horner lay face downwards on his ledge, and studied the perpendicular rock below him for a way to reach the nest. He had no very definite idea what he wanted to do when he got there; possibly, if the undertaking seemed feasible, he might carry off one of the royal brood and amuse himself with trying to domesticate it.

But, at any rate, he hoped to add something, by a closer inspection, to his rather inadequate knowledge of eagles.

And this hope, indeed, as he learned the next moment, was not unjustified. Cautiously he was lowering himself over the edge, feeling for the scanty and elusive foothold, when all at once the air was filled with a rush of mighty wings, which seemed about to overwhelm him. A rigid wing-tip buffeted him so sharply that he lost his hold on the ledge. With a yell of consternation, which caused his assailant to veer off startled, he fell backwards, and plunged down straight upon the nest.

It was the nest only that saved him from instant death. Tough and elastic, it broke his fall; but at the same time its elasticity threw him off, and on the rebound he went rolling and bumping on down the steep slopes below the ledge, with the screaming of the eagles in his ears, and a sickening sense in his heart that the sunlit world tumbling and turning somersaults before his blurred sight was his last view of life. Then, to his dim surprise, he was brought up with a thump; and clutching desperately at a bush which scraped his face, he lay still. At the same moment a flapping mass of feathers and fierce claws landed on top of him, but only to scramble off again as swiftly as possible with a hoarse squawk. He had struck one of the young eagles in his fall, hurled it from the nest, and brought it down with him to this lower ledge which had given him so timely a refuge.

For several minutes, perhaps, he lay clutching the bush desperately and staring straight upwards. There

he saw both parent eagles whirling excitedly, screaming, and staring down at him; and then the edge of the nest, somewhat dilapidated by his strange assault, overhanging the ledge about thirty feet above. At length his wits came back to him, and he cautiously turned his head to see if he was in danger of falling if he should relax his hold on the bush. He was in bewildering pain, which seemed distributed all over him; but in spite of it he laughed aloud, to find that the bush, to which he hung so desperately, was in a little hollow on a spacious platform, from which he could not have fallen by any chance. At that strange, uncomprehended sound of human laughter the eagles ceased their screaming for a few moments and wheeled farther aloof.

With great difficulty and anguish Horner raised himself to a sitting position and tried to find out how seriously he was hurt. One leg was quite helpless. He felt it all over, and came to the conclusion that it was not actually broken; but for all the uses of a leg, for the present at least, it might as well have been putty, except for the fact that it pained him abominably. His left arm and shoulder, too, seemed to be little more than useless encumbrances, and he wondered how so many bruises and sprains could find place on one human body of no more than average size. However, having assured himself, with infinite relief, that there were no bones broken, he set his teeth grimly and looked about to take account of the situation.

II

The ledge on which he had found refuge was apparently an isolated one, about fifty or sixty feet in length, and vanishing into the face of the sheer cliff at either end. It had a width of perhaps twenty-five feet; and its surface, fairly level, held some soil in its rocky hollows. Two or three dark-green seedling firs, a slim young silver birch, a patch or two of wind-beaten grass, and some clumps of harebells, azure as the clear sky overhead, softened the bareness of this tiny, high-flung terrace. In one spot, at the back, a spread of intense green and a hand-breadth of moisture on the rock showed where a tiny spring oozed from a crevice to keep this lonely oasis in the granite alive and fresh.

At the farthest edge of the shelf, and eyeing him with savage dread, sat the young eagle which had fallen with him. Horner noticed, with a kind of sympathy, that even the bird, for all his wings, had not come out of the affair without some damage; for one of its black wings was not held up so snugly as the other. He hoped it was not broken. As he mused vaguely upon this unimportant question his pain so exhausted him that he sank back and lay once more staring up at the eagles, who were still wheeling excitedly over the nest. In an exhaustion that was partly sleep and partly coma his eyes closed. When he opened them again, the sun was hours lower and far advanced towards the west, so that the ledge was in shadow. His head was now perfectly clear; and his first thought was of getting

himself back to the canoe. With excruciating effort he dragged himself to the edge of the terrace and looked down. The descent, at this point, was all but perpendicular for perhaps a hundred feet. In full possession of his powers he would find it difficult enough. In his present state he saw clearly that he might just as well throw himself over as attempt it.

Not yet disheartened, however, he dragged himself towards the other edge of the terrace, where the young eagle sat watching him. As he approached, the bird lifted his wings, as if about to launch himself over and dare the element which he had not yet learned to master. But one wing drooped as if injured, and he knew the attempt would be fatal. Opening his beak angrily, he hopped away to the other end of the terrace. But Horner was paying no heed to birds at that moment. He was staring down the steep, and realising that this ledge which had proved his refuge was now his prison, and not unlikely to become also his tomb.

Sinking back against a rock, and grinding his teeth with pain, he strove to concentrate his attention upon the problem that confronted him. Was he to die of thirst and hunger on this high solitude before he could recover sufficiently to climb down? The thought stirred all his dogged determination. He *would* keep alive, and that was all there was about it. He *would* get well, and then the climbing down would be no great matter. This point settled, he dismissed it from his consideration and turned his thoughts to ways and means. After all, there was that little thread of a spring trickling from the rock! He would have enough to drink. And as for

food—how much worse it would have been had the ledge been a bare piece of rock! Here he had some grass, and the roots of the herbs and bushes. A man could keep himself alive on such things if he had will enough. And, as a last resource, there was the young eagle! This idea, however, was anything but attractive to him; and it was with eyes of good-will rather than of appetite that he glanced at his fellow-prisoner sitting motionless at the other extremity of the ledge.

"It'd be hard lines, pardner, ef I should hev to eat you, after all!" he muttered, with a twisted kind of grin. "We're both of us in a hole, sure enough, an' I'll play fair as long as I kin!"

As he mused, a great shadow passed over his head, and looking up, he saw one of the eagles hovering low above the ledge. It was the male, his old acquaintance, staring down at him from under that strange, black brow. He carried a large fish in his talons, and was plainly anxious to feed his captive young, but not quite ready to approach this mysterious man-creature who had been able to invade his eyrie as if with wings. Horner lay as still as a stone, watching through half-closed lids. The young eagle, seeing food so near, opened its beak wide and croaked eagerly; while the mother bird, larger but wilder and less resolute than her mate, circled aloof with sharp cries of warning. At last, unable any longer to resist the appeals of his hungry youngster, the great bird swooped down over him, dropped the fish fairly into his clutches, and slanted away with a hurried flapping which betrayed his nervousness.

As the youngster fell ravenously upon his meal,

tearing it and gulping the fragments, Horner drew a deep breath.

"There's where I come in, pardner," he explained. "When I kin git up an appetite for that sort of vittles, I'll go shares with you, ef y'ain't got no objection!"

Having conceived this idea, Horner was seized with a fear that the captive might presently gain the power of flight and get away. This was a thought under which he could not lie still. In his pocket he always carried a bunch of stout salmon-twine and a bit of copper rabbit-wire, apt to be needed in a hundred forest emergencies. He resolved to catch the young eagle and tether it securely to a bush.

His first impulse was to set about this enterprise at once. With excruciating effort he managed to pull off his heavy woollen hunting-shirt, intending to use it as the toreador uses his mantle, to entangle the dangerous weapons of his adversary. Then he dragged himself across to the other end of the ledge and attempted to corner the captive. For this he was not quite quick enough, however. With a flop and a squawk the bird eluded him, and he realised that he had better postpone the undertaking till the morrow. Crawling back to his hollow by the bush, he sank down utterly exhausted. Not till the sharp chill which comes with sunset warned him of its necessity, was he able to grapple with the long, painful problem of getting his shirt on again.

Through the night he got some broken sleep, though the hardness of his bed aggravated every hurt he had suffered. On the edge of dawn he saw the male eagle

come again—this time more confidently and deliberately—to feed the captive. After he was gone, Horner tried to move, but found himself now, from the night's chill and the austerity of his bed, altogether helpless. Not till the sun was high enough to warm him through and through, and not till he had manipulated his legs and arms assiduously for more than an hour, did his body feel as if it could ever again be of any service to him. Then he once more got off his shirt and addressed himself to the catching of the indignant bird whom he had elected to be his preserver.

Though the anguish caused by every movement was no less intense than it had been the afternoon before, he was stronger now and more in possession of his faculties. Before starting the chase, he cut a strip from his shirt to wind around the leg of the young eagle, in order that he might be able to tether it tightly without cutting the flesh. The bird had suddenly become most precious to him!

Very warily he made his approaches, sidling down the ledge so as to give his quarry the least possible room for escape. As he drew near, the bird turned and faced him, with its one uninjured wing lifted menacingly and its formidable beak wide open. Holding the heavy shirt ready to throw, Horner crept up cautiously, so intent now upon the game that the anguish in the leg which he dragged stiffly behind him was almost forgotten. The young bird, meanwhile, waited motionless and vigilant, its savage eyes hard as glass.

At last a faint quiver and shrinking in the bird's form, an involuntary contracting of the feathers, gave

warning to Horner's experienced eye that it was about to spring aside. On the instant he flung the shirt, keeping hold of it by the sleeve. By a singular piece of luck, upon which he had not counted at all, it opened as he threw it, and settled right over the bird's neck and disabled wing, blinding and baffling it completely. With a muffled squawk it bounced into the air, both talons outspread and clawing madly; but in a second Horner had it by the other wing, pulling it down, and rolling himself over upon it so as to smother those dangerous claws. He felt them sink once into his injured leg, but that was already anguishing so vehemently that a little more or less did not matter. In a few moments he had his captive bundled up into helplessness, and was dragging it to a sturdy bush near the middle of the terrace. Here, without much further trouble, he wrapped one of its legs with the strip of flannel from his shirt, twisted on a hand-length of wire, and then tethered it safely with a couple of yards of his doubled and twisted cord.

Just as he had accomplished this to his satisfaction, and was about to undo the imprisoning shirt, it flashed across his mind that it was lucky the old eagles had not been on hand to interfere. He glanced upward—and saw the dark form dropping like a thunderbolt out of the blue. He had just time to fling himself over on his back, lifting his arm to shield his face, and his foot to receive the attack, when the hiss of that lightning descent filled his ears. Involuntarily he half closed his eyes. But no shock came, except a great buffet of air on his face. Not quite daring to grapple with that

ready defence, the eagle had opened its wings when within a few feet of the ledge, and swerved upward again, where it hung hovering and screaming. Horner saw that it was the female, and shook his fist at her in defiance. Had it been his old acquaintance and challenger, the male, he felt sure that he would not have got off so easily.

Puzzled and alarmed, the mother now perched herself beside the other eaglet, on the edge of the nest. Then, keeping a careful eye upon her, lest she should return to the attack, Horner dexterously unrolled the shirt, and drew back just in time to avoid a vicious slash from the talons of his indignant prisoner. The latter, after some violent tugging and flopping at his tether and fierce biting at the wire, suddenly seemed to conclude that such futile efforts were undignified. He settled himself like a rock and stared unwinkingly at his captor.

It was perhaps an hour after this, when the sun had grown hot, and Horner, having slaked his thirst at the spring in the rock, had tried rather ineffectually to satisfy his hunger on grass-roots, that the male eagle reappeared, winging heavily from the farthest end of the lake. From his talons dangled a limp form, which Horner presently made out to be a duck.

"Good!" he muttered to himself. "I always did like fowl better'n fish."

When the eagle arrived, he seemed to notice something different in the situation, for he wheeled slowly overhead for some minutes, uttering sharp yelps of interrogation. But the appeals of the youngster at last

brought him down, and he delivered up the prize. The moment he was gone Horner crept up to where the youngster was already tearing the warm body to pieces. Angry and hungry, the bird made a show of fighting for his rights; but his late experience with his invincible conqueror had daunted him. Suddenly he hopped away, the full length of his tether; and Horner picked up the mangled victim. But his appetite was gone by this time. He was not yet equal to a diet of raw flesh. Tossing the prize back to its rightful owner, he withdrew painfully to grub for some more grass-roots.

After this the eagle came regularly every three or four hours with food for the prisoner. Sometimes it was a fish—trout, or brown sucker, or silvery chub—sometimes a duck or a grouse, sometimes a rabbit or a musk-rat. Always it was the male, with that grim black streak across the side of his white face, who came. Always Horner made a point of taking the prize at once from the angry youngster, and then throwing it back to him, unable to stomach the idea of the raw flesh. At last, on the afternoon of the third day of his imprisonment, he suddenly found that it was not the raw flesh, but the grass-roots, which he loathed. While examining a fine lake-trout, he remembered that he had read of raw fish being excellent food under the right conditions. This was surely one of those right conditions. Picking somewhat fastidiously, he nevertheless managed to make so good a meal off that big trout that there was little but head and tail to toss back to his captive.

"Never mind, pardner!" he said seriously. "I'll

divide fair nex' time. But you know you've been havin' more'n your share lately."

But the bird was so outraged that for a long time he would not look at these remnants, and only consented to devour them, at last, when Horner was not looking.

After this Horner found it easy enough to partake of his prisoner's meals, whether they were of fish, flesh, or fowl; and with the ice-cold water from the little spring, and an occasional mouthful of leaves and roots, he fared well enough to make progress towards recovery. The male eagle grew so accustomed to his presence that he would alight beside the prisoner and threaten Horner with that old, cold stare of challenge, and frequently Horner had to drive him off in order to save his share of the feast from the rapacity of the eagle. But as for the female, she remained incurably suspicious and protesting. From the upper ledge, where she devoted her care to the other nestling, she would yelp down her threats and execrations, but she never ventured any nearer approach.

For a whole week the naked hours of day and dark had rolled over the peak before Horner began to think himself well enough to try the descent. His arm and shoulder were almost well, but his leg, in spite of ceaseless rubbing and applications of moist earth, remained practically helpless. He could not bear his weight on it for a second. His first attempt at lowering himself showed him that he must not be in too great haste. It was nearly a week more before he could feel assured, after experiments at scaling the steep above him, that

he was fit to face the terrible steep below. Then he thought of the eaglet, his unwilling and outraged preserver! After a sharp struggle, of which both his arms and legs bore the marks for months, he caught the bird once more and examined the injured wing. It was not broken; and he saw that its owner would be able to fly all right in time, perhaps as soon as his more fortunate brother in the nest above. Satisfied on this point, he loosed all the bonds and jumped back to avoid the indomitable youngster's retort of beak and claws. Unamazed by his sudden freedom, the young eagle flopped angrily away to the farther end of the ledge; and Horner, having resumed his useful shirt, started to climb down the mountain, whose ascent he had so heedlessly adventured nearly two weeks before. As he lowered himself over the dizzy brink, he glanced up, to see the male eagle circling slowly above him, gazing down at him with the old challenge in his unwinking, golden eyes.

"I reckon you win!" said Horner, waving the imperturbable bird a grave salutation. "But you're a gentleman, an' I thank you fer your kind hospitality."

It was still early morning when Horner started to descend the mountain. It was dusk when he reached the lake and flung himself down, prostrated with fatigue and pain and strain of nerve, beside his canoe. From moment to moment, through spells of reeling faintness and spasmodic exhaustion, the silent gulfs of space had clutched at him, as if the powers of the solitude and the peak had but spared him so long to crush him inexorably in the end. At last, more through the sheer

indomitableness of the human spirit than anything else, he had won. But never afterwards could he think of that awful descent without a sinking of the heart. For three days more he made his camp by the lake, recovering strength and nerve before resuming his journey down the wild river to the settlement. And many times a day his salutations would be waved upward to that great, snowy-headed, indifferent bird, wheeling in the far blue, or gazing at the sun from his high-set watch-tower of the pine.

III

Two or three years later, it fell in Horner's way to visit a great city, many hundreds of miles from the grey peak of "Old Baldy." He was in charge of an exhibit of canoes, snow-shoes, and other typical products of his forest-loving countrymen. In his first morning of leisure, his feet turned almost instinctively to the wooded gardens wherein the city kept strange captives, untamed exiles of the wilderness, irreconcilable aliens of fur and hide and feather, for the crowds to gape at through their iron bars.

He wandered aimlessly past some grotesque, goatish-looking deer which did not interest him, and came suddenly upon a paddock containing a bull moose, two cows, and a yearling calf. The calf looked ungainly and quite content with his surroundings. The cows were faded and moth-eaten, but well fed. He had no

concern for them at all. But the bull, a splendid, black-shouldered, heavy-muffled fellow with the new antlers just beginning to knob out from his massive forehead, appealed to him strongly. The splendid, sullen-looking beast stood among his family, but towered over and seemed unconscious of them. His long, sensitive muzzle was held high to catch a breeze which drew coolly down from the north, and his half-shut eyes, in Horner's fancy, saw not the wires of his fence, but the cool, black-green fir thickets of the north, the grey rampires of the windy barrens, the broad lily leaves afloat in the sheltered cove, the wide, low-shored lake-water gleaming rose-red in the sunset.

"It's a shame," growled Horner, "to keep a critter like that shut up in a seven-by-nine chicken-pen!" And he moved on, feeling as if he were himself a prisoner, and suddenly homesick for a smell of the spruce woods.

It was in this mood that he came upon the great dome-roofed cage containing the hawks and eagles. It was a dishevelled, dirty place, with a few uncanny-looking dead trees stuck up in it to persuade the prisoners that they were free. Horner gave a hasty glance and then hurried past, enraged at the sight of these strong-winged adventurers of the sky doomed to so tame a monotony of days. But just as he got abreast of the farther extremity of the cage, he stopped, with a queer little tug at his heart-strings. He had caught sight of a great, white-headed eagle, sitting erect and still on a dead limb close to the bars, and gazing through them steadily, not at him, but straight into the eye of the sun.

"Shucks! It ain't possible! There's millions o' bald eagles in the world!" muttered Horner discontentedly.

It was the right side of the bird's head that was turned towards him, and that, of course, was snowy white. Equally of course, it was, as Horner told himself, the height of absurdity to think that this grave, immobile prisoner, gazing out through the bars at the sun, could be his old friend of the naked peak. Nevertheless, something within his heart insisted it was so. If only the bird would turn his head! At last Horner put two fingers between his mouth, and blew a whistle so piercing that everyone stared rebukingly, and a policeman came strolling along casually to see if anyone had signalled for help. But Horner was all unconscious of the interest which he had excited. In response to his shrill summons the eagle had slowly, very deliberately, turned his head, and looked him steadily in the eyes. Yes, there was the strange black bar above the left eye, and there, unbroken by defeat and captivity, was the old look of imperturbable challenge!

Horner could almost have cried, from pity and homesick sympathy. Those long days on the peak, fierce with pain, blinding bright with sun, wind-swept and solitary, through which this great, still bird had kept him alive, seemed to rush over his spirit all together.

"Gee, old pardner!" he murmured, leaning as far over the railing as he could. "But ain't you got the grit! I'd like to know who it was served this trick on you. But don't you fret. I'll git you out o' this, ef it takes a year's arnings to do it! You wait an' see!" And with his jaws set resolutely he turned and strode

from the gardens. That bird should not stay in there another night if he could help it.

Horner's will was set, but he did not understand the difficulties he had to face. At first he was confronted, as by a stone wall, by the simple and unanswerable fact that the bird was not for sale at any price. And he went to bed that night raging with disappointment and baffled purpose. But in the course of his efforts and angry protestations he had let out a portion of his story—and this, as a matter of interest, was carried to the president of the society which controlled the gardens. To this man, who was a true naturalist and not a mere dry-as-dust cataloguer of bones and teeth, the story made a strong appeal, and before Horner had quite made up his mind whether to get out a writ of *habeas corpus* for his imprisoned friend, or commit a burglary on the cage, there came a note inviting him to an interview at the president's office. The result of this interview was that Horner came away radiant, convinced at last that there was heart and understanding in the city as well as in the country. He had agreed to pay the society simply what it might cost to replace the captive by another specimen of his kind; and he carried in his pocket an order for the immediate delivery of the eagle into his hands.

To the practical backwoodsman there was no fuss or ceremony now to be gone through. He admired the expeditious fashion in which the keeper of the bird-house handled his dangerous charge, coming out of the brief tussle without a scratch. Trussed up as ignominiously as a turkey—proud head hooded, savage

talons muffled, and skyey wings bound fast, the splendid bird was given to his rescuer, who rolled him in a blanket without regard to his dignity, and carried him off under his arm like a bundle of old clothes.

Beyond the outskirts of the city Horner had observed a high, rocky, desolate hill which seemed suited to his purpose. He took a street car and travelled for an hour with the bundle on his knees. Little his fellow-passengers guessed of the wealth of romance, loyalty, freedom, and spacious memory hidden in that common-looking bundle on the knees of the gaunt-faced, grey-eyed man. At the foot of the hill, at a space of bare and ragged common, Horner got off. By rough paths, frequented by goats, he made his way up the rocky slope, through bare ravines and over broken ridges, and came at last to a steep rock in a solitude, whence only far-off roofs could be seen, and masts, and bridges, and the sharp gleam of the sea in the distance.

This place satisfied him. On the highest point of the rock he carefully unfastened the bonds of his prisoner, loosed him, and jumped back with respect and discretion. The great bird sat up very straight, half raised and lowered his wings as if to regain his poise, looked Horner dauntlessly in the eye, then stared about him and above, as if to make sure that there were really no bars for him to beat his wings against. For perhaps a full minute he sat there. Then, having betrayed no unkingly haste, he spread his wings to their full splendid width and launched himself from the brink. For a few seconds he flapped heavily, as if his wings had grown unused to their function. Then he got his rhythm, and

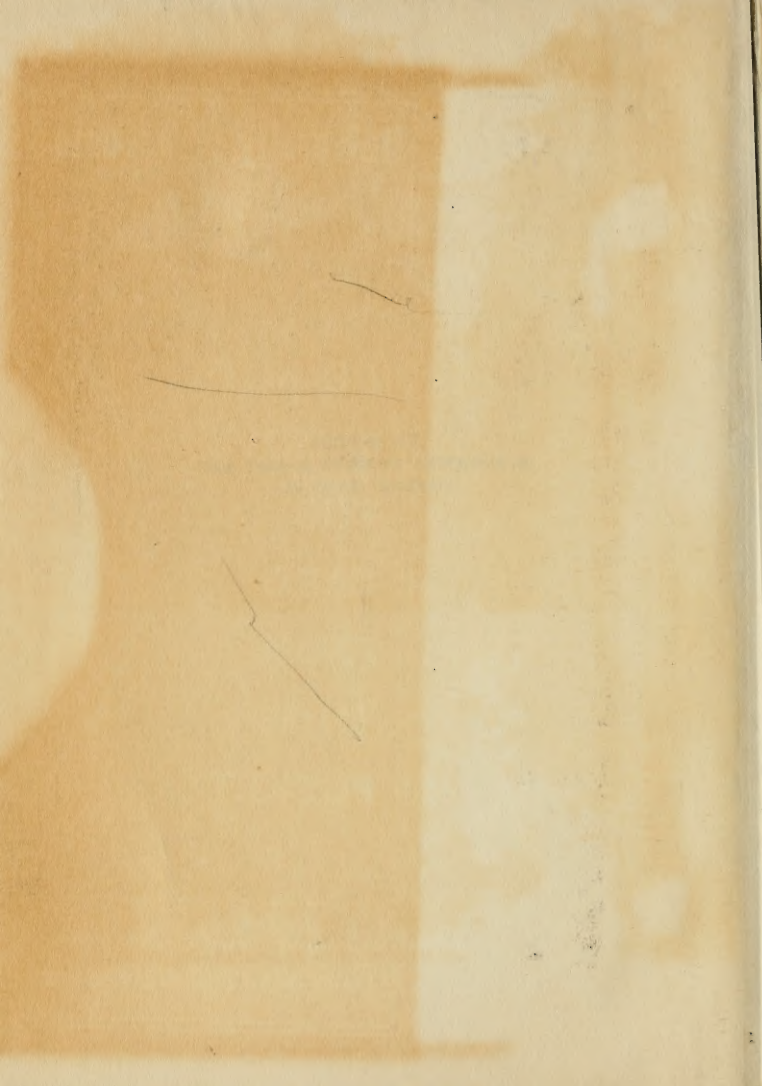
swung into a wide, mounting spiral, which Horner watched with sympathetic joy. At last, when he was but a wheeling speck in the pale blue dome, he suddenly turned and sailed off straight towards the north-east, with a speed which carried him out of sight in a moment.

Horner drew a long breath, half wistful, half glad.

"Them golden eyes of yourn kin see a thunderin' long ways off, pardner," he muttered, "but I reckon even you can't make out the top of 'Old Baldy' at this distance. It's the eyes o' your heart ye must have seen it with, to make for it so straight!"



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